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Rolling Stone

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ISSUE 1376

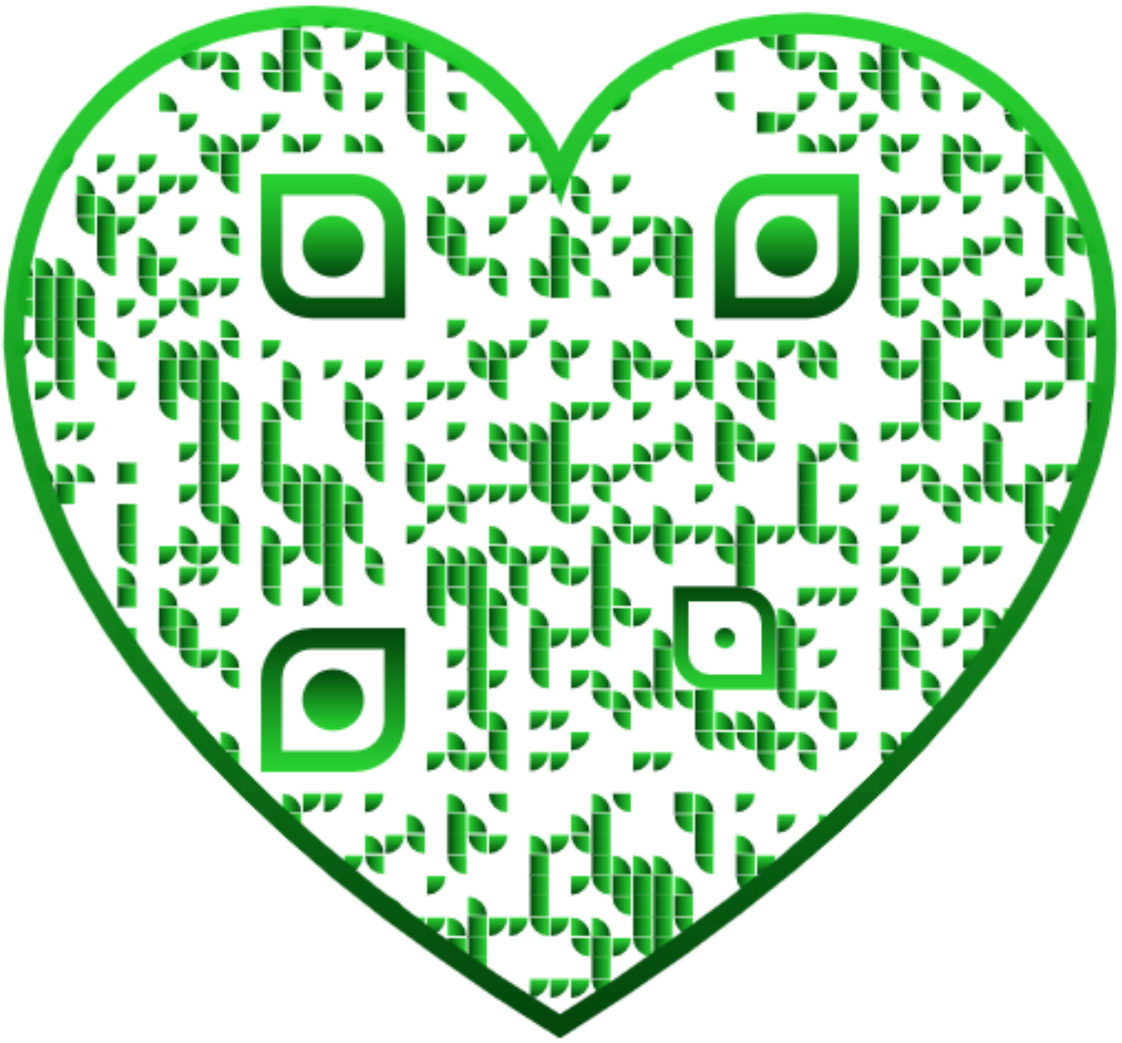
Janelle Monáe
Freer Than Ever

The Defiance *of* Drag

KESHA RETURNS

The Mariachi Lifting Up Uvalde

FRAT BOY FIGHT NIGHT



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m&m's caramel cold brew

with a coffee shop vibe

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Five Musical Genres That Flourished in Missouri

Missouri has always been a crossroads for explorers, from Marquette and Joliet to Lewis and Clark. The state also served as a cultural trading post through the years, with immigrants, travelers and visionaries sharing perspectives and swapping stories. That exchange made Missouri a music powerhouse and turned St. Louis, Kansas City and other parts of the state into cradles of musical innovation for many years. It's no surprise then that Missouri has played a vital role in the creation and cultivation of some of the world's most popular music styles.

Here are five genres that have roots in Missouri – and where you can go to hear them on a trip to the Show-Me State.

BLUES/R&B

In the 19th-century Deep South, enslaved people penned songs that reflected the tragedy and sorrow in their lives. As slavery ended and free Black people made their way north, those musical traditions evolved into a new form in cities like St. Louis, where what we now know as the blues emerged and seminal artists like Bennie Smith and Eva Taylor grew up. St. Louis' vital contributions to the blues made the city the perfect home for the National Blues Museum, where visitors can learn about the genre from the people who knew it best. After you've absorbed the history of the blues, you can hear its still-flourishing legacy live at any number of venues throughout the city. There's the Broadway Oyster Bar, Hwy 61 Roadhouse and Kitchen (named after the "Blues Highway" that starts in New Orleans), and BB's Jazz, Blues and Soups, a venue and restaurant that has been dazzling blues devotees since 1976. And no blues tour is complete without a lunch stop at Blues City Deli, where you can enjoy performances in between bites of roast beef po'boys.

JAZZ

The role of Missouri in jazz's development can't be overstated. Long before New York City clubs became the genre's epicenter, luminaries like Charlie Parker and Miles Davis were developing their chops in Kansas City and St. Louis. And Kansas City is still a destination for jazz aficionados from around the world who flock to 18th and Vine – the city's Jazz District – to see where the genre found its footing. For history buffs, there's the American Jazz Museum, which includes exhibits featuring some of jazz's most important players, such as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and, of course, the city's own Charlie Parker. From there, you can make your way around Kansas City's constellation of jazz venues, from the Blue Room located in the American Jazz Museum itself to the iconic Green Lady Lounge just down the street. And no visit to Kansas City is complete without a ticket to a gig at the Midland Theatre, an iconic venue that has hosted jazz legends for decades.

MO RECOMMENDS

Mo recommends St. Louis to dive deep into the history of the blues.

ROCK/POP

When St. Louis-born Chuck Berry played those inimitable first notes of "Maybellene," a whole new genre was born. Rock & roll has come a long way in the near-70 years since Berry blended blues, jazz and gospel into a groundbreaking sound, but the roots of the music are still firmly planted in Missouri. For Rock & roll fans who want a taste of history (and maybe something to eat), Blueberry Hill is a must-see. The St. Louis restaurant and music club has the largest collection of Chuck Berry memorabilia in the world. Berry graced the stage in the Duck Room hundreds of times, and it's become one of the city's most treasured music venues.

Other rock and pop musicians from Missouri include original Doobie Brother Michael McDonald, a St. Louis native, and Sheryl Crow, whose hometown of Kennett is located in the state's "bootheel."

COUNTRY/BLUEGRASS

You can't talk about country music without mentioning Branson. The Ozark town is a temple to all things country, with dozens of venues that pay homage to the genre. The Grand Country Music Hall is home to the Grand Jubilee Show, where in-house performers take audiences through a veritable jukebox of hits from country's biggest stars. Presleys' Country Jubilee combines bluegrass, country and comedy into one unforgettable show at a venue started by Branson's original music family.

But Missouri's country music legacy extends far beyond Branson. Songwriter, guitarist and record producer T Bone Burnett was born in St. Louis. Rhonda Vincent, bluegrass singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist, hails from Greentop in the northeast part of the state and performs at Silver Dollar City's Bluegrass & BBQ Festival every year.

RAGTIME

The upbeat, piano-driven genre known as ragtime was one of the most popular sounds at the turn of the 20th century, and two of its most influential evangelists are Missouri legends. Scott Joplin – known as the "King of Ragtime" – was born in Texas but found his fame in Sedalia, a small town between Kansas City and St. Louis where he wrote "Maple Leaf Rag." The song boosted the young composer's profile and caught the ears of Americans from coast to coast, making him one of the country's most successful musicians at the time. Music history buffs can attend the annual Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival in Sedalia and tour Joplin's former home at the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site in St. Louis, where a player piano fills the space with some of the composer's best-known work.

There's also John William "Blind" Boone, a pianist and composer who became an international sensation despite losing his sight at a young age. Boone was born in the small Missouri River town of Miami and made his name as a lightning-fast piano player in Columbia. The Blind Boone Home, a two-story Victorian house in Columbia, has been preserved as a landmark where visitors can learn about the musician's legacy and catch performances by artists who are still being influenced by the composer to this day.

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From Music to Food to Art, Kansas City Is a Cultural Paradise

Located near the confluence of the Kansas and Missouri rivers, Kansas City has been a center of culture and commerce for more than two centuries. The city's multiple fountains, wide boulevards and bustling nightlife gave it the nickname "Paris of the Plains" in the early 1900s. It's clear that Kansas Citians have taken that title seriously, as the city continues to be a hot spot for art, music, sports and history.

If you're a culture buff, there's no better place to visit right now than Kansas City. Here are some can't-miss stops for your itinerary.

KAUFFMAN CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

The Kauffman Center's notable architecture, featuring a series of vertical, concentric arches, has been a distinct part of the Kansas City skyline since 2011. Soaring glass windows in the complex's main hall give patrons impressive views of downtown before they enter two remarkable performance spaces: Muriel Kauffman Theatre and Helzberg Hall. The state-of-the-art venue is home to the world-class Kansas City Symphony, Lyric Opera of Kansas City and Kansas City Ballet. The center has also hosted seminal artists like Aretha Franklin and Philip Glass, so be sure to check the event calendar, whether you're a classical music devotee, ballet aficionado or music lover in general.

NELSON-ATKINS MUSEUM OF ART

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art offers a unique blend of past and present that only a place with the history of Kansas City can provide. The museum combines the original Beaux-Arts space built in the 1930s with an unmistakably modern addition, the Bloch Building, completed in 2005. The architectural juxtaposition creates a stunning backdrop for one of the country's most comprehensive art collections, including a comprehensive archive of Asian art. Admission to the museum is free, but you'll need to reserve timed tickets, so be sure to plan your visit in advance.

MO RECOMMENDS

Mo recommends staying at the Crossroads Hotel for an iconic and historic home base.

NEGRO LEAGUES BASEBALL MUSEUM

Before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947, a group of Black professional baseball leagues thrived throughout the United States. Teams like the New York Cubans, the Homestead Grays and, of course, the Kansas City Monarchs toured the country and dazzled fans from coast to coast. The leagues waned after Major League Baseball became integrated, but the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum brings that vital history – and its contributions to the fight for civil rights – to life in downtown Kansas City. It's definitely worth a stop, whether you're a sports fan or not.

CROSSROADS HOTEL

Located in the arts-focused Crossroads neighborhood, the Crossroads Hotel is a boutique establishment created in the historic Pabst Brewing Depot. If you're looking for a home base for a visit to Kansas City, you'd be hard pressed to do better than the 131-room hotel that includes Percheron, a seasonal rooftop bar with commanding views of the city, and Lazia, a fine dining restaurant that specializes in traditional Italian cuisine with a modern influence.

ARABIA STEAMBOAT MUSEUM

There's nothing like a treasure hunt, and the Arabia Steamboat Museum located in City Market highlights one of the most exciting finds in Kansas City history. The steamboat, which sank in 1856, was recovered 132 years later along with its cargo of clothing, fine china, carpentry tools, guns, toys and ... the world's oldest pickles. It's an exhibit unlike any other and is the perfect way to start or end a day at City Market with the entire family.

NATIONAL WWI MUSEUM AND MEMORIAL

Originally opened just eight years after the Great War claimed more than 9 million lives, the National WWI Museum and Memorial became the country's official World War I museum in 2004. The 32,000-square-foot complex features engaging exhibits that offer a comprehensive history of the war and include life-size trenches and armaments that transport visitors back to the 1910s. One of the most stunning areas in the museum is the Paul Sunderland Bridge, a glass and steel expanse suspended over a field of 9,000 poppies, each one representing 1,000 combatants who lost their lives in the conflict.

Backstage With the Next Big Girl Group

THE MEMBERS of the British R&B trio FLO — Jorja Douglas, Stella Quaresma, and Renée Downer — are still getting acquainted with tour life. "Living out of a suitcase is so stressful," Quaresma says. "Honestly," Douglas agrees. "But at least we're doing it together." After winning fans online with tracks like last year's single "Cardboard Box" and their recent Missy Elliott collab, "Fly Girl," FLO spent this spring on the road in the U.S. for the very first time. "It's nice to see someone with a fan account at a show," Quaresma says. "Not only did they show up for you online — but they came out to support you in real life." TOMÁS MIER

Downer, Quaresma, and Douglas (from left) in London

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE WORLD'S UGLIEST SANDAL ABOUT ~~SUSTAINABILITY~~ FASHION?

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You've Never Heard Kesha Like This

Her new album is full of unfiltered anger, grief, and insecurity: 'I really dug into my uglier emotions'

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Magdalena Wosinska**

KESHA

Kesha says her thirties are all about self-exploration.

KESHA WAS on the verge of a panic attack in the spring of 2020, when her aging cat Mr. Peeps brought over her headphones. She'd been spiraling a lot back then, her anxiety mounting as the pandemic shut down the music industry, but she took her cat's gesture as a sign that it was time to meditate. And in the midst of a guided meditation she'd done many times before, something shook loose.

"I had this really beautiful, scary, and intense spiritual awakening where it felt like I was talking to my highest self, or God, whatever word you want to say," she recalls. Three years later, she's reclining on pristine white sheets with Mr. Peeps beside her at her L.A. home, dressed in simple white leisurewear with her hair in a messy topknot. "I fully thought I was having a mental breakdown. I called my therapist and my doctor. They all were like, 'Oh, you had a spiritual awakening. Yay! Good job.' "

The next day, she wrote a song titled "Eat the Acid," in which she recounted that night, plus some clutch advice from her mother: "Do whatever you want in your life, but don't eat acid, because when you eat acid, you see things that you'll never be able to unsee."

At the time, she didn't think the song would ever see the light of day, but in the end, that track became the genesis of her fifth studio album, *Gag Order,* out now. The album was produced by Rick Rubin, a fellow Pisces who bonded with Kesha over the spirituality that she'd tapped into while *not* dropping acid.

"I feel like I'm giving birth to the most intimate thing I've ever created," the singer says, sounding as jittery as a high school student at her first recital. It's a stark contrast to the Ke$ha of 2012, who cheekily extolled the virtues of the "lady-wang" to ROLLING STONE (sample sentence: "My lady-wang is becoming increasingly moist by the minute"). Gone is the bravado, the "fuck it" attitude; Kesha is laying it all bare, and she seems genuinely nervous about the world seeing this side of her. "I really dug into some of my uglier emotions and sides of myself that are less fun," she adds. "It's scary being vulnerable. The fact that I have compiled an entire record of these emotions, of anger, of insecurity, of anxiety, of grief, of pain, of regret, all of that is so nerve-racking – but it's also so healing."

You probably think you know Kesha by now. Whether it's Ke$ha, the 22-year-old who boasted about brushing her teeth with a bottle of Jack back in 2009, or Kesha at 30, who ostensibly grew up and found herself on 2017's *Rainbow,* which came a few years after she checked into a treatment center for mental-health issues and an eating disorder. Thirty-six-year-old Kesha is yet another evolution – which makes sense, because as she says, her twenties were "strange and interesting," while her thirties have been about self-exploration. "I wrote 'TiK ToK,' and 'the party don't start 'til I walk in,' so I almost felt like I was becoming a caricature of this toxic positivity," she says. "We live in a culture where I feel like we always show our best side. But Rick Rubin created the most beautiful, safe space for me to really dive into these emotions."

While *Rainbow* and its follow-up, 2020's *High Road,* feature both introspective songs and tracks perfect for getting amped before going out, *Gag Order* is a true about-face. There's not much to dance to here, but there's plenty to chew on. "Living in My Head," which Kesha says she wrote in the middle of another panic attack, is a painful listen in the tradition of John Lennon's "Cold Turkey." "Every time I listen to 'Living in My Head,' I just want to curl up in a ball and hide," she says.

"Fine Line" comes the closest to addressing her current legal predicament, which, of course, is echoed in the title of the album. "I feel as if there has been an implied gag order for a very long time now," she says. "With my ongoing litigation hanging over my head, I have not been able to speak freely because I know everything I say is scrutinized." Kesha first filed suit against her producer and label owner Dr. Luke in 2014, alleging an extended period of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and attempting to extricate herself from her contract. Luke, real name Lukasz Gottwald, countersued that same year, vehemently denying all of her allegations and claiming that the singer had defamed him. A judge dismissed Kesha's claims in 2016, largely on the grounds that they were too old, but Luke's defamation suit continues to this day, despite several appeals. That case is set to go to trial this summer.

Kesha's anger is palpable in "Fine Line," in which she rants at "all the doctors and lawyers [who] cut the tongue out of my mouth," culminating with the line "But hey, look at all the money we made off me." It's a striking statement, given that this reportedly could be the last LP in her contract with Dr. Luke's Kemosabe Records. It's also a way for her to get a word in edgewise before the trial. (Prior to the interview, ROLLING STONE was instructed not to ask Kesha about the trial since the case is still pending, and her team could not confirm the status of her contract.)

There's a lot of fight on this record, with Kesha comparing herself to a demon on more than one track. It's also got its share of pain and loss: She wrote "Too Far Gone," she reveals, after ending her secret engagement to a boyfriend she won't name, who she says is still a friend.

Spirituality has always been a constant in Kesha's music, even in her wilder *Warrior* days. But on *Gag Order,* it's woven into the fabric of every song: The late *Be Here Now* author and guru Ram Dass gets a whole interlude (an ex gave her a copy of the book while she was in rehab), Indian philosopher Osho is sampled on "All I Need Is You," and Oberon Zell, an 80-year-old wizard she met while making her podcast *Kesha and the Creepies,* appears on the last song, "Happy," proclaiming: "Sometimes, you think you're doing the magic, and sometimes you realize the magic is doing you."

Most of all, love is a constant on this album – love of her family, love of herself, love of her cats, and sheer love of music. After spending some time at a studio in Hawaii, Kesha and Rubin recorded most of the record at his studio, Shangri-La, in Malibu, where she would often hear Neil Young playing guitar across the canyon as the waves crashed below. "It was the most beautiful experience I've ever had in my entire life," she says. "I would just sit and listen, legitimately having happy tears roll down my face." **BRENNA EHRLICH**

FAST FACTS

CAT FANCY
The bittersweet love song "All I Need Is You" isn't about her ex, as you might guess — it's about Mr. Peeps, who had a near-death experience last year. Kesha says he's "the true love of my life."

FAMILY AFFAIR
Kesha's eight-year-old niece Luna features on the album, reading a quote from a Fifties LSD experiment. "When Luna sees her aunt's name calling on my phone, she often grabs it and runs off to talk with her auntie for hours," Kesha's brother Lagan says. "I'm so happy to see another generation get into the mix."

HAIR BY HOLLY MILLS AT THE WALL GROUP. MAKEUP BY SANDY GANZER AT FORWARD ARTISTS. STYLING BY TURNER AT THE WALL GROUP. PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE BY DOUGLAS STUCKEY. PREVIOUS PAGE: BODYSUIT BY MAISON MARGIELA. JEANS BY LEVI'S. JACKET BY THE FRANKIE SHOP. THIS PAGE: JACKET BY GIULIVA HERITAGE.

All Hail the Gods of Gloom: The Cure's Glorious Return

Instead of fading away, Robert Smith and his eccentric gang stuck around to become this summer's hottest rock tour

ROB SHEFFIELD
SOUND AND VISION

THERE'S SOMETHING so beautifully weird about the triumphant return of the Cure. It's a crazy moment for fans – of all the fandoms in pop history, this is one of the most bizarrely long-lived, open-ended, multigenerational, cheerfully unkillable. Robert Smith and his crew of English gloom gods are hitting the road all summer, introducing music from their long-awaited album, *Songs From a Lost World,* which is so long-awaited it still doesn't exist. The summer's biggest rock tour is the goth-moppet lover boy who sang "Boys Don't Cry" more than 40 years ago? That's a future nobody would have predicted for this band – not even Smith.

But nobody even hates the Cure anymore, which once seemed like a crucial part of the fandom's identity. Smith has never lost his aura of bemused angst, with his dripping gobs of eyeliner, his smeared red lipstick, his sticky black-bat swamp of hair. He always gives the vibe of a mischievous toddler who just got caught playing with mother's makeup. For a tortured genius who used to be one of the most divisive figures in music, he really thrives in the role of a universally cherished elder, everybody's favorite eccentric goth auntie.

He's touring the U.S. at the same time that his old friend Siouxsie Sioux is doing her first shows in a decade. Throw in the Love and Rockets reunion, and you've got a hell of an undead summer for gothic icons. It might feel like a paradox to stand in an arena full of strangers, singing about soul-crushing loneliness, but that's the essence of being a Cure freak. It's been 15 years since their last album, yet this music is timeless. The band that gave the world *Disintegration* is the band that will never, ever disintegrate.

Lately they've been debuting new tunes from *Lost World,* like the nearly 10-minute showstopper "Alone." Smith has spent years promising the new album is almost done, any day now, honest. ("It'll be worth the wait," he said last year backstage at a London awards show. "I think [it's] the best thing we've done, but then I *would* say that.") As he told ROLLING STONE the last time he released new music, back in 2008, "I like the sound of deadlines as they rush past my head." He's said this one will be like *Disintegration,* except without songs that "lighten the mood," and he didn't even mean it as a joke.

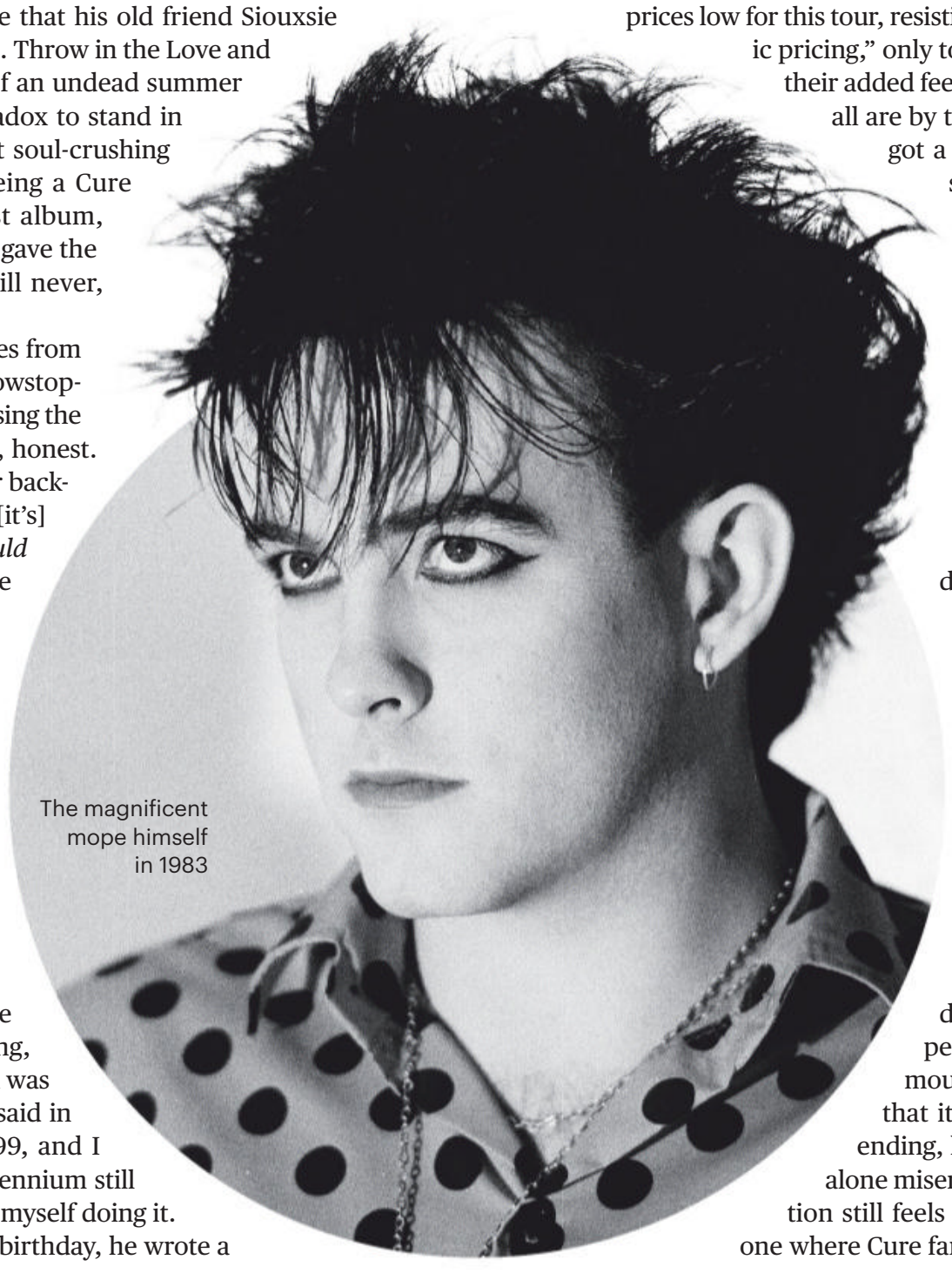
Longevity didn't really seem like it was in the cards for this band. By the time the Cure released their 1986 greatest-hits album, *Standing on a Beach,* a band scholar calculated that Robert Smith had already died 74 times in his lyrics. It already seemed strange that these Three Imaginary Boys had lasted so long, especially since the high-strung frontman was always threatening to quit music. As he said in 1996, "I will be 40 years old in April '99, and I think it will be awful to enter a new millennium still in a band called the Cure. I just can't see myself doing it. I would be horrified." On the cusp of his birthday, he wrote a song called "39," moaning, "The fire is almost out, and there's nothing left to burn." But as it turned out, he wasn't even halfway done. This guy never stops.

He originally made his bones with gloom soufflés like *Faith, Pornography,* and *Seventeen Seconds*. But then he chose to open up the music. He's never been the kind of rocker who pretends he didn't want to get famous. "I decided to be a pop star," he told ROLLING STONE in 2004. "It's so ludicrous that I'm gonna go from goth idol to pop star in three easy lessons." He nailed it on the first try, with 1982's "Let's Go to Bed," a brilliant synth-pop groove about a couple staying up all night to bond about how miserable they are. "Suddenly 'Let's Go to Bed' was turning into a big hit, on the West Coast particularly, and we had a young, predominately female, teenage audience," he continued. "It went from intense, menacing, psychotic goths to people with perfect white teeth.... I thought it was really funny."

This tour has brought out his fighting side, which we hardly ever see. He's one of the very, very few bankable stars to speak out about Ticketmaster and the absolute hellhole that the concert-ticket racket has become for fans. He kept ticket prices low for this tour, resisting the bait-and-switch scam of "dynamic pricing," only to see Ticketmaster double the cost with their added fees. He declared, "I am as sickened as you all are by today's Ticketmaster 'fees' debacle." He got a minimal refund for fans – but there's something touching about his willingness to get his hands dirty here.

One of the eternal riddles for fans: How can Smith reign as rock's ultimate troubadour of romantic despair when he's been happily married for decades to his childhood sweetheart? But that's one of the artistic masks he wears, like his makeup. As he said back in the 1990s, "The notion that people have of me, that I'm not a grown-up, I live in this imaginary world and wander about London in pajamas quoting Baudelaire, is not true." (He went on to explain that it's untrue because he lives by the sea, not London. "Now I march briskly up and down the beach quoting Baudelaire at the waves!" This is why he is Robert Smith.)

"I could die tonight of a broken heart," he sings on one of the new songs, "A Fragile Thing," although, as Al Pacino would say in *The Godfather Part II,* he's been dying of the same broken heart for years now. He does end up solitary in most songs – especially "Just Like Heaven," his most famous hit, a wedding banger despite the fact that it's a love story with an impossibly sad ending, leaving Robert stuck in his alone-alone-alone misery. But somehow the emotional destruction still feels cathartic. If that's a contradiction, it's one where Cure fans feel right at home.



The magnificent mope himself in 1983

STEVE RAPPORT/GETTY IMAGES

NIGHTLIFE

Parties Putting Skin in the Game

THIS SUMMER, realness is in at the queerest of places. The music is booming, the dance floor inviting, and *everybody* is welcome.

For as long as DJs have been spinning – from the birth of Studio 54 in 1977 through the vogueing ballrooms, big-room clubs, and underground lounges of the decades that followed – New York's nightlife has offered solace and escape for queer creativity. It's within these historic venues that American designer Halston often found his inspiration, ultimately transforming him into one of the most celebrated fashion figures in history. These are the kinds of rooms that led Madonna to thrust Jean Paul Gaultier's cone bra into the spotlight and gave George Michael the space to strut his freedom with help from a few supermodels. Today, the beats go on and DIY is the norm.

"It's all about expression, especially in queer communities," says Joni, the architect of Intima, a roving rave founded in the wake of Covid lockdowns. "You go to the club to be a part of something." That same community vibe flows through Papi Juice, a dance party 10 years strong in the heart of Bushwick, Brooklyn. Individuality and intimacy are the guiding forces, and it's all on display on the dance floor, where harnessed, fishnetted, leather-clad, short-short-baring, metal-stud-wearing folks of all ages, races, and genders shake their tail feathers; skin is very in; and a mix of old and new styles has created something uniquely 2023. "There's so many different ways to show up," says Mohammed Fayaz, one of Papi Juice's three co-founders.

Battle Hymn, a monthly party hosted in Manhattan's Chelsea by nocturnal impresario Ladyfag, may be the epitome of a night out where partygoers go to find their chosen family and glory in their realest selves, to tunes spun by top DJs who include Honey Dijon, Todd Terry, and Danny Krivit. "We've celebrated birthdays. We've had someone get engaged here," Ladyfag says. "Oh, my gosh. I've seen people get divorced. All these things have happened through this lens of Battle Hymn. There's something special about that." STEVEN PEARL AND KYLE LAMAR RICE

▲ WHO'S THAT GIRL?
"What a lot of people fail to realize is that these spaces are a form of therapy for so many people," says Linux, a prolific downtown figure, as she sits among her crew wrapped in a Mugler bodysuit. "We congregate at nightlife spaces and celebrate one another, ourselves, and life. That is priceless."

HOT MESH

Gender-neutral label Leak Your Sex Tape was "born on the dance floor," says founder Louis Dorantes, a Brooklyn-based designer whose mesh bodysuits (seen on a clubgoer here) have a cult following. "Barhopping in gentrified neighborhoods does not serve our community. However, paying for an event that is hosted by an artist, with sets by your fave trans goddess, and tipping the local queer POC bartender does," Dorantes adds.

FUR & FANTASIES

"Nightlife in and of itself is a fantasy — hyperbole and escapism all woven together," says Markus Kelle, a Battle Hymn regular seen here in a coat by Alex Dymek.

UNIQUE NEW YORK

"We value difference in our communities, never taking on the monolithic identities of labels," says Oscar Nñ, one-third of Papi Juice's founding trio. "Because of that, sonically every party's different. It's never just reggaton or rap. Every single event is unique."

THE ROXY REBORN

Papi Juice has become a focal point in culture that recalls the heyday of the Roxy, Manhattan's historic disco, house, and hip-hop club. "We live at this intersection of art, music, fashion, and nightlife," says Mohammed Fayaz, Papi Juice's visual artist.

THEY CALL HER "MOTHER"

Right: Ladyfag is a grande dame of glamour, a promoter par excellence, and the magnetic force behind Battle Hymn: "It's an interesting thing. Battle Hymn has been there for people through so many things. It creates a bond."

A STYLE RENAISSANCE

Far right: CT Hedden is a fixture in nightlife whose style has caught the eyes of designers like Marc Jacobs and Kim Jones of Fendi and Dior. "Thanks, Ladyfag, for seven years of debauchery," they wrote online.

THIS PAGE: MARCO OVANDO. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP: LEO FOO, 2; MARCO OVANDO; ANGEL AÑAZCO; MARCO OVANDO

▶ SMOKIN' IN BROOKLYN

Intima's host Joni is a multi-hyphenate who DJs, performs, and produces events. "This generation is about a clash of everything that came before us to try to make something new and different," she says. "Today is so much about not only music and art, it's also about internet and connection. That's a clash of everything that exists. It shows in our parties, too."

▼ THAT SENSE OF AWE

"Battle Hymn was one of my first queer parties where everyone I came across was in a look and wasn't afraid to express themselves in their truest form," says Beau Gotier (right). "All identities were present, and I was just in awe. Papi Juice is one of the most important parties, filled with great vibes, fun people, and the music is always on point."

▲ LET THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN

Performances like this one by LustSickPuppy, who mixes hyperpop, DIY punk, and hardcore beats, punctuate Intima's spicy sets — which recently included Kevin Aviance and a Goth Jafar jam on the same night. "It was just beautiful to see the younger generation of queer kids meet up with the older generation," says Joni.

◀ THE JUICE BOYS

Papi Juice founders Adam R., Oscar Nñ, and Mohammed Fayaz (from left) have been changing the face of everyday New York for the past decade. "We bring in over a thousand people every time, and these folks are mostly queer and trans people of color," says Nñ. "That's mad special."

▲ WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS

"Wrestling has always been a super-masculine, hyper-dramatic, costume-induced sport. Growing up, I was an avid fan," says Battle Hymn regular Andersen Anderson, sporting Junya Watanabe denim, a Supreme cap, and an oversize WWE belt. "Camp it up or stay home."

◀ GLAMMING IT UP

Downtown diva Amanda Lepore, the apotheosis of self-realization, is combat-ready at Battle Hymn. The model, singer, artist, and former club kid is known for her iconic work with luminaries including David LaChapelle, Jason Wu, Grace Jones, and Elton John.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CARLOS BECERRA; LEO FOO; ANGEL AÑAZCO, 2; MARCO OVANDO, 2

PROFILE

How Joanna Sternberg Made It Through the Fire

To follow up their acclaimed 2019 debut, Sternberg had to start learning who to trust

By JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

SHERVIN LAINEZ

JOANNA STERNBERG can still remember the time they were almost beaten up over the band Maroon 5. It was a middle school birthday party, and Sternberg's classmates had found out that Sternberg didn't share their taste for songs like "Moves Like Jagger."

"I was like, 'Oh, God, turn it off,' and everyone else was like, 'Yay, it's my favorite music,' " says Sternberg, 31. "It was a legitimate reason to beat me up."

Sternberg's tastes have never been in line with their generation. By age 12, they were listening to gospel, a solitary pursuit until they discovered a group of fellow jazz snobs at their arts-oriented Manhattan high school. But those musical idiosyncrasies are exactly what made Sternberg's 2019 debut, *Then I Try Some More*, a word-of-mouth cult favorite. That album's distinctive mix of piano chops à la Scott Joplin with Elliott Smith-level emotional intimacy earned Sternberg fans in everyone from Jeff Tweedy to Phoebe Bridgers, who has called the singer an "emo Randy Newman." ("I was like, 'Oh, my God, she gets it,' " Sternberg says.)

The pressure and opportunities that arose from such unexpected acclaim led to a difficult several years for Sternberg. But the end result of that trying time – their second album, *I've Got Me*, out June 30 – is a stunning showcase of Sternberg's musicianship and songwriting. They describe the period leading up to its recording as a series of setbacks that left them feeling taken advantage of by the music industry right as they began to fully address their own mental-health challenges.

"I was hiding in my room for weeks, just being sick," says Sternberg, who has been open about their past struggles with addiction. "This record just kind of symbolized me trying to get better.... It really cured my life."

The songs on *I've Got Me*, which Sternberg recorded with veteran rock producer-guitarist Matt Sweeney, are openhearted reflections on healing, heartbreak, and hope. The piano ballad "Drifting on a Cloud" is about the short-lived elation the singer felt when first prescribed Zoloft; on the title track, they proudly claim their own "faults and flaws" as part of who they are. "Between self-hatred and self-awareness is a very small, thin line," they sing.

"Joanna's songs are working out these struggles, but the really powerful ones feel like victories, in a strange way," says Sweeney. "They flipped this horrible thing into something we can all relate to."

"Artists like Joanna are a rare breed," adds the singer Mary Lou Lord, who became a mentor to Sternberg during the pandemic. "They're sensitive, and they're not built like everybody else, which is what makes their music so beautiful. Their brains don't work like normal, regular, boring people."

If Sternberg's debut was a snapshot of a time and place, *I've Got Me* is a musical statement Sternberg has been waiting their entire life to share, one where they play every single instrument (cello, violin, guitar, piano, double bass, to name a few). "I've been secretly saving these songs, hoping for something like this," says Sternberg.

Some time after *Then I Try Some More* was released, Sternberg says, they received "the biggest, best opportunity I've ever been given" to make their follow-up LP. But without going into details, they say the experience went sour, one of several toxic industry encounters that they attribute to their propensity to be overly trusting.

"Artists like Joanna are a rare breed," Mary Lou Lord says. "They're not built like everybody else, which is what makes their music beautiful."

"I've been taken advantage of and humiliated a lot, but I don't know what to do," says Sternberg. "I'm not going to stop being who I am." At a certain point, they say, receiving some proper medical diagnoses helped them understand the pattern of their trust being violated. "Autism, ADHD, whatever I have ... ever since I got diagnosed, I was able to see what happened."

These days, Sternberg is feeling healthier than ever, with a new team of trusted advisers that includes both Sweeney and Lord. "I was able to quit substances and do all this stuff, but it really came from [my mentors] guiding me," Sternberg says, "and being able to finish this record I've dreamed of making my whole life."

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INTERVIEW

The Quiet Passion of Cillian Murphy

After years of stealing the show in supporting roles, the actor steps up to leading man in Christopher Nolan's 'Oppenheimer'

By CHRISTINA NEWLAND

THE SUN IS SHINING in the small riverside town of New Ross, Ireland. It's Good Friday, and I'm standing outside St. Mary's, a defunct Catholic school. Crew members scamper toward their lights and cranes. Two rows of schoolgirls are led by a nun through the yard. Incongruously, through the sunshine, a snow machine periodically emits suds that melt on your face as you pass: This is Christmas 1985 via Easter weekend 2023. There, amid a clutch of equipment and crew members in the usual on-set menagerie, stands Cillian Murphy, co-producer and star of *Small Things Like These,* in a cinematic return to his native Ireland.

Murphy isn't easy to spot. Your eyes don't immediately land on him as if following an unholy halo of superstar light. That may seem strange, given that many of us have spent years watching his charisma on-screen cut swaths through every scene, or gazing into those otherworldly ice-blue eyes that occasionally offer a flash of gangster malevolence.

A highlight reel of Murphy's work is itself prodigious. You might recall his transgender glam-rock singer in *Breakfast on Pluto*. You almost certainly know his cold, feline grace in *Peaky Blinders*. And, of course, there was his sinister Scarecrow in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*.

Now his bespectacled visage can be seen in ads for this summer's enormous new Nolan film: *Oppenheimer,* in which he'll play one of the most recognizable historical minds of the 20th century, J. Robert Oppenheimer, the nuclear physicist who created the atomic bomb.

With his distinctive face, the Cork native, 47, has become a go-to collaborator for Nolan, who's cast him in six of his films. "I remember very clearly, I saw a picture of him in the newspaper," Nolan tells me over the phone from Los Angeles. "It was for *28 Days Later*. He had his head shaved, and those extraordinary eyes. I hadn't seen the film. It was just the look of him, it struck me." Yet in person, that striking screen presence melts into total ordinariness: He is physically slight, unassuming, almost diffident. He sticks out his hand and introduces himself by his first name, like I was going to confuse him with anyone else.

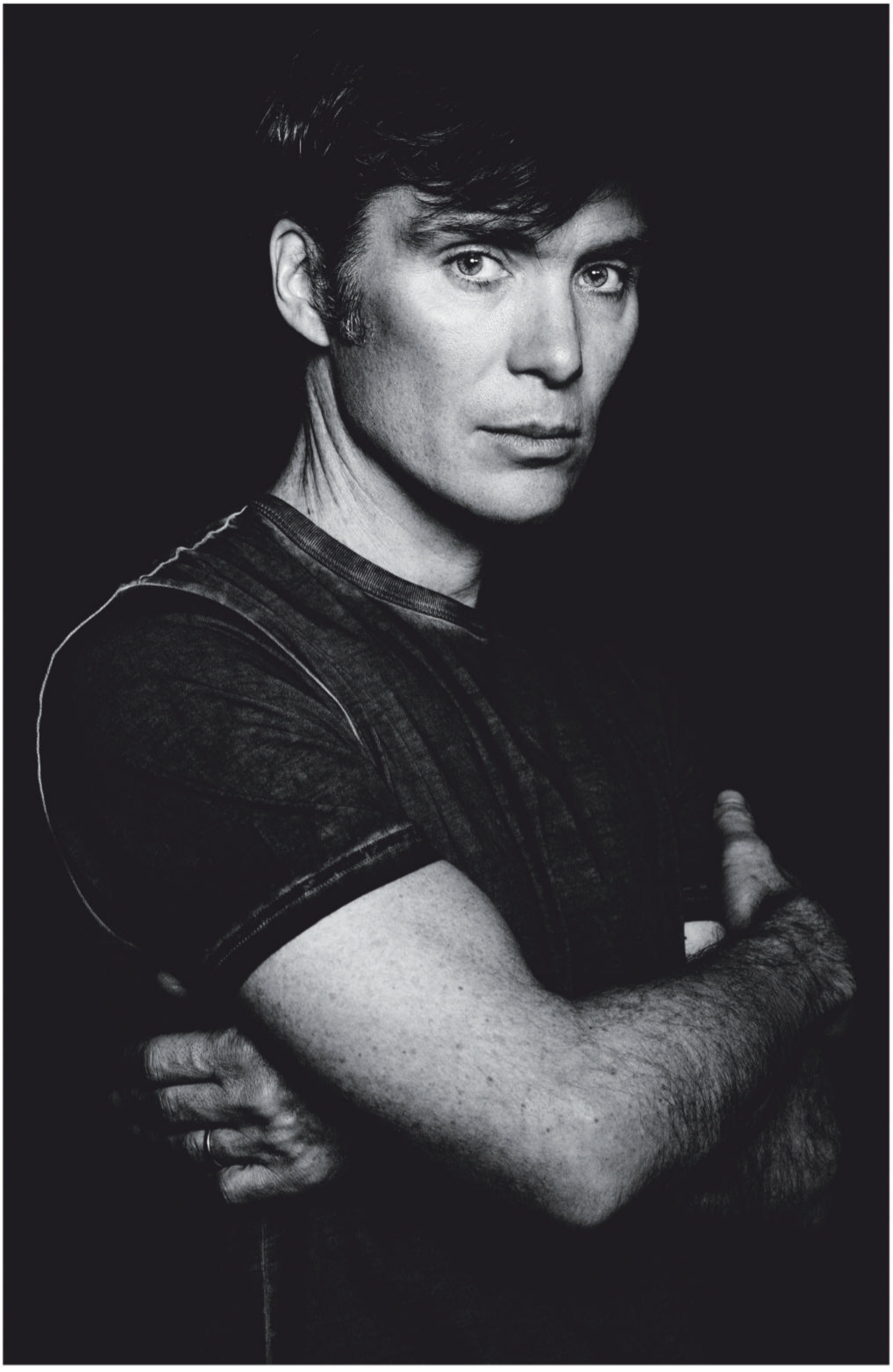
Murphy is in between shooting exterior scenes, so he's wearing the costume of his *Small Things* character, Bill Furlong, an Eighties coal man with too many mouths to feed. That means a worn-in wax jacket, threadbare trousers, artificially coal-dusted hands, and a genuinely bleeding cut seeping across his knuckles (he caught it while shoveling in a scene). We drink coffee before he rushes off to shoot again, lifting cinder blocks from a truck in the pretend snow of an Irish winter.

Adapted for the screen from Claire Keegan's acclaimed and heart-wrenching novella, *Small Things Like These* was handpicked by Murphy: It's his passion project. It deals with the insidious moral complicity of Irish society within the Magdalene Laundries, religious institutions in which women and girls were imprisoned and forced to carry out unpaid labor. "Everyone in Ireland that you talk to, of a certain generation, more or less has a story. It's just *in* Irish people," says Murphy. "What happened with the church, I think we're still kind of processing it. And art can be a balm for that."

'Oppenheimer,' about the so-called father of the atomic bomb, is in theaters July 21.

The production is set here at St. Mary's, which actually operated as a laundry in the past. "You can feel the texture, and in the tiny house where we shot, you can feel the claustrophobia. Chris [Nolan] is also a big fan of that. If you're put in the right environment, you will act differently when you walk on set with your fucking soy latte, or whatever."

The influence of Nolan is clear in Murphy's exacting attitude. They first worked together back in 2005, when Murphy auditioned for what would become Christian Bale's role as Bruce Wayne himself before being cast instead as Dr. Jonathan Crane – Scarecrow – in *Batman Begins*. Thus began a collaboration that would lead to him playing Oppenheimer. "I was a Chris Nolan fan. That's how I was when I met him for the first time, because I'd watched *Following,* I'd watched *Memento,* I'd watched *Insomnia*. And I met him for *Batman Begins* on the basis of being a fan. So it feels absurd that I've been in six of his films.



“Interviews are like commuting,” Murphy says with a sigh. “You have to commute to get to your destination. I don’t really partake.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Kosmas Pavlos**

"But I always hoped I could play a lead in a Chris Nolan movie. What actor wouldn't want to do that?"

IF IT WERE to be said that Murphy specializes in anything, it might be expressing the thoughts and motivations of inward men who are not prone to garrulousness or fervent displays of emotion. Nolan certainly seems to think so: "Cillian has this extraordinary empathetic ability to carry an audience into a thought process."

Such is the case with his near-decade of playing Tommy Shelby, the World War I veteran turned criminal kingpin of *Peaky Blinders*. So, too, with the very different character he plays in *Small Things Like These,* a monosyllabic working man who is nevertheless constantly lost in a web of thought and memory. And in *Oppenheimer,* he plays the complicated scientist who became a symbol for our collective ambivalence about nuclear weapons and the American deployment of them in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. But as a man, Oppenheimer was artistic and sensitive, a lover of poetry as much as of science, and a strident anti-fascist.

"I think it's the best script I ever read," Murphy says. The script was written entirely in the first person. "[Nolan] just said he wanted everything to be seen through the eyes of Oppenheimer," the actor adds.

Understandably, portraying such an elaborately brilliant mind had its challenges. "With that intellect – which I think can actually be a burden – you're not seeing stuff in the normal plane that we do. Everything is multifaceted and about to collapse. It'd be a terrible way to buy milk or cut the grass, I'd say."

Dislocation from the ordinary is hardly unfamiliar for Murphy. Congenitally private, he left London for Dublin about eight years ago with his wife, artist Yvonne McGuinness, and his sons. "We had 14 years in London. But as you hit your late thirties and have kids, living in a major metropolis is less exciting. Also we're both Irish. We wanted the kids to be reared Irish. I think it's the best decision we made," he says, pointing out that he sold his kids – now nearly 16 and nearly 18 – on the move with the promise of a Labrador.

"They're really good boys," he says, affectionately. "We don't do 'Dad's Movie Night,' but they like some of my films. They say all my films are really intense."

Amid the increasingly frenzied obsession with *Peaky Blinders,* Murphy has become something more than an actor with a recognizable face: He's synonymous with his character Tommy Shelby, which is an uneasy negotiation for Murphy. "It can ruin experiences, because it fetishizes everything: You can be walking down the street and someone takes a picture, like this is a fucking event. It kind of destroys nuance and human behavior, but that's part and parcel of it," he says of his reluctant relationship with fame.

EXPLOSIVE Murphy as Oppenheimer. Left: With Nolan on set.

"Fame evaporates with regularity," Murphy says, gesturing around the restaurant where we're chatting. "I'm around here all the time and no one gives a fucking shit. It dissipates. But if ... one of the guys from *Succession* walked in here, I'd be all intimidated and shaky. When you're confronted with someone you've invested a lot in, or you think is amazing, the encounter is strange."

There's no sense of affectation about Murphy: He really does dislike all of the rigmarole that comes with promoting a project. Before our interview, he says to me: "I look forward to my grilling."

"A light grilling," I reply, a bit taken aback by what seem to be his jangling nerves.

Later, he sighs while relating how "interviews are like commuting. You have to commute to get to your destination. I don't really partake." He adds, "I don't go out. I'm just at home mostly, or with my friends, unless I have a film to promote. I don't like being photographed by people."

"I think it's the Tommy Shelby thing. People expect this mysterious [person] ... it's just a character."

After the Season Six finale aired, talk ignited about a possible *Peaky Blinders* film, with creator Stephen Knight confirming the plans. "If there's more story there, I'd love to do it," Murphy says. "But it has to be right. Steve Knight wrote 36 hours of television, and we left on such a high. I'm really proud of that last season. So, it would have to feel legitimate and justified to do more."

As the evening winds down, Murphy seems more relaxed. He's clearly happier talking about *Inside Llewyn Davis* and Joni Mitchell than himself. Given his interest in music – he tells me how his teenage band was nearly signed to a major label – I wonder if he'd be game to introduce a musical component into his film work.

"I almost want to protect my relationship with it," he says of his love of music. "It was my first love, and I worked really hard at trying to be a musician and it didn't work out," he says. "But I've turned down quite a few biopic roles of musicians," he reveals, although he won't say which. "I'd prefer to watch a three-hour Scorsese doc about George Harrison than play George Harrison in a bad wig." He smiles. "It wasn't George Harrison I was asked to play, by the way."

Back in New Ross, the sun has set and a few of us have retreated into a tent with a monitor and a headset through which we can see and hear the shooting – and the conversations among Murphy, director Tim Mielants, and co-star Zara Devlin. I listen as Murphy suggests reblocking the scene, chewing ice cubes to make the actors' wintery breath appear, and changing the way he enters the frame. Producer Alan Moloney murmurs with tacit approval that "Cillian interrogates everything." But it's when Murphy and Devlin improvise that an electric energy charges through the set. A simple scene becomes heartbreaking; a gruff, terse man shows a glimpse of soft underbelly, a vulnerability all the more powerful for its restraint.

When filming breaks, Murphy stands with his hands in his pockets; suddenly he looks delicate. He's back behind the parapet, where it's safe for a moment. But it's clear he's good and ready for the skirmish.

Cillian's Greatest Hits

1. 28 Days Later 2002
A ragged Murphy wakes from a coma to a pandemic.

2. Breakfast on Pluto 2005
He made a splash as a trans glam-rock singer.

3. Batman Begins 2005
A turn as Scarecrow started a partnership with Chris Nolan.

4. The Wind That Shakes the Barley 2006
He embodies the 1920s Fightin' Irish spirit.

5. Peaky Blinders 2013-22
Most know him as veteran turned kingpin Tommy Shelby.

MELINDA SUE GORDON/UNIVERSAL PICTURES, 2

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Q&A

Jenny Lewis

On touring with Harry Styles, living in Nashville, the importance of failure, and her excellent new album

By ANGIE MARTOCCIO

JENNY LEWIS knows she's not a real Southerner. "Let's be honest," the 47-year-old indie-rock icon says on a Zoom call. "I'm a Jewish girl from the Valley, transplanted in East Nashville. I'm not an outlaw at all." It's true: In Tennessee, where Lewis has been splitting her time with L.A. since 2017, the only law she breaks is smoking weed. She's also allergic to horses. And bonfires. "I'm the nerdiest, wimpiest Nashvillian," she confirms. Even so, Lewis' new album, *Joy'All*, is her *Nashville Skyline* moment, full of cozy melodies and lush pedal steel guitar. There's even a song titled "Giddy Up." And during our interview, she drops wisdom like a local in a porch rocking chair. "You can look outward," she says. "But really, you got to get on your pony and ride on out."

On 2021's "Puppy and a Truck," you sang, "My forties are kicking my ass/ And handing them to me in a margarita glass." Do you still feel like your forties are kicking your ass?
Oh, absolutely. I mean, my twenties and thirties were kicking my ass. That's just my karma. Every 10 years, something major happens in my life and I melt down, but I persevere. Now, people can forever figure out how old I am, because I say [in the song], "I'm 44 in 2020." So all you have to do is the math.

How did getting a puppy and a truck change you?
I was in a really rough spot. I'd been isolated for over a year, quarantining totally on my own, and I had to find things to get me out of the house. The truck provided that. I don't have any kids, but this dog opened me up in so many ways – being responsible for a soul and caring for something outside of yourself. Kind of obvious, but I had no idea.

Your last album felt very cathartic. This one sounds like you're having fun.
This record is a little prayer to myself. The more I play these songs, I realize it's about my relationship with myself and my higher power. There's something about having a positive title that draws people in, instead of *Death in the Valley*, or whatever I could have called it.

When you opened for Harry Styles, you were basically performing to 20,000 people who didn't know your music well. Was that a fun challenge?
I was up for it. It almost felt like the biggest DIY tour of all time because we were in our respective bubbles. There was no press in the pit, no one backstage. So it almost felt like the old-school days touring with Rilo Kiley before phones, and it felt very intimate despite being very big. I was free as fuck.

This is a funny story: During the pandemic, I went over to Ringo's house to sing background on one of his songs ["Here's to the Nights"]. And we're masked, and he's like, "How are you?" I said, "I feel like for the first time in my life, I'm off the hook." And Ringo said, [*in a perfect Liverpool accent*] "I wish I was on the hook!" Sorry to just name-drop Ringo. That's pretty big.

What kind of TV did you get into during the pandemic?
I watched every single Ryan Murphy-related production. So I've watched all of *American Horror Story,* which I absolutely love, and everything adjacent. Sarah Paulson is my favorite actress. That's how I became a fan.

She was an excellent Linda Tripp in *Impeachment* a couple of years ago.
She was so good. But you just can't record your friends, ever. I didn't appreciate Monica Lewinsky at the time, because she was so vilified. But when you really get to know that story, Clinton's the fucking douchebag.

Did you watch *Yellowjackets*?
I did, the first season. I loved it. We truly are in this Nineties-revival moment. I have a pair of Docs that I've been rocking again.

What do you think kids get wrong about that era?
Luckily, it seems that the full brow is still a thing. I would never tweeze my eyebrows like I did in the Nineties, because they never fully grew back.... I can't believe I'm talking about the Nineties, like a VH1 talking head.

OK, how about the early 2000s? *The Execution of All Things* recently turned 20, and you're about to do a 20th-anniversary Postal Service tour. How do those anniversaries feel?
It feels pretty weird. Time flies. Enjoy it. I appreciate all of it – the records, the bands, the good songs, the mediocre songs, the failed attempts, which I think is what makes artists interesting. You have to falter. You have to make your *Trans* – the Neil Young record everyone hated at the time. But that's a great fucking record. Only time will tell.

Do you ever see a Rilo Kiley reunion happening?
I'm open to it, for sure. It just has to be the right alchemy and the right timing. I think we owe it to each other to play those songs again, because that's the magic of being in a band. It's just the four people in a room and the energy that creates.

Speaking of reunions, I keep seeing rumors of a *Troop Beverly Hills* sequel in the works. Is this true?
I don't know. Is it? I haven't gotten the memo if it is.

What do you think it would be like to act again?
"It's been a while," to quote Staind. I think if Ryan Murphy were somehow involved, I'd be open to it.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHELLE HELENA JANSSEN;
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The end of the beginning

Just three albums into his career, Loyle Carner has cemented his position as one of UK rap's most singularly unique voices, using his music to capture a kaleidoscope of moments in his life. His latest, 'Hugo', arrived to huge acclaim in October last year and saw the 28-year-old opening up on how fatherhood has transformed his life. "I think as I'm coming to the end of the beginning, I get to kind of see a beginning starting again, so it's allowed me to see the world through my son's eyes, and it looks big," he recently told Rolling Stone UK of the records. Its relatable themes have clearly struck a chord with the legion of fans who sold out his recent UK tour – which included a stop-off at the iconic Wembley Arena. This summer, even greater heights await when he headlines Glastonbury's West Holts Stage.

LOYLE WEARS PUFFER JACKET BY **ALWAYS DO WHAT YOU SHOULD DO**, T-SHIRT BY **PRO CLUB AT BLACKSMITHS**, TROUSERS BY **CARHARTT AT MR PORTER**, WALLABEE BOOTS BY **CLARKS ORIGINALS**

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Guns at the Pride Parade

Hateful rhetoric is leading to armed protests from the far right. But now, they're not the only ones with weapons

By JACK CROSBIE

THE YOUNG WHITE nationalist across the street from the drag show starts to panic. He and his friend – two white men, probably in their early twenties, with baseball hats, and faces masked by the kind of stretchy gaiters middle-aged guys wear on fishing boats – hold a big sign with bold, black letters: "Pedophiles get the rope." But their expressions change as they're suddenly surrounded by figures dressed in all-black with combat boots, military helmets, balaclavas, body armor, and tinted goggles, their gloved hands balled into fists.

It's a Monday afternoon in Fort Worth, Texas, and the group in all black are mostly members of the Elm Fork chapter of the John Brown Gun Club (JBGC), a left-wing anti-fascist organization created to level the playing field with right-wing militias that show up armed to protests around the country.

The black-clad figures are up in the white nationalist's face. He shouts, they shout. Suddenly, the white nationalist's mirrored sunglasses fly off his head in a glittering arc, landing in the middle of the street. "That's assault!" the white nationalist shrieks, backing away. His hand fumbles under his shirt. I notice for the first time the outline of a compact pistol in a concealed holster in the front of his waistband.

"Get your hand off your gun!" someone from the Elm Fork crew shouts. I slide a few steps to my left – out of the line of fire. The white nationalist backs up as he screams slurs, hand still on his gun. The Elm Fork crew's rifles are back in their cars.

THE NEW GUARD A member of the John Brown Gun Club patrols an abortion-rights march in Denton, Texas, last summer.

I look around to see if anyone else from the growing crowd of protesters is reaching for weapons. In the parking lot nearby, there's someone in black on a motorcycle wearing crisscrossed bandoliers of shotgun shells across their chest, and a gun strapped to their saddle. There's another guy in a bucket hat with a sign that reads "Kink and kids don't mix"; a far-right livestreamer; and about half a dozen young men from the New Columbia Movement, a far-right Christian nationalist group.

Across the street, a long line of people wait to enter the drag show inside the music venue Tulips FTW. In spite of the tension building all around them, they cheer, dance, and blow soap bubbles into the air.

The event is a weekly all-ages trivia night hosted by a drag queen named Salem Moon. It's clear the staff has been through this chaos be-

SHELBY TAUBER/REUTERS/REDUX

fore. Two bouncers wearing black T-shirts that say "Welcome home" pat down each attendee and check every bag.

If you're looking for the front line in America's sprawling culture war, this is it. For the past year, the conservative movement has zeroed in on the LGBTQ community, specifically targeting trans people and drag queens, who they claim "groom" children into a life of abuse and sin. This accusation has no statistical basis or grounds in reality, but what it does have is the ability to make people really, really mad – and for the worst elements of the far right, that's an opportunity.

Some white nationalists and virulent evangelicals have seized upon trans panic to mobilize new recruits, bolstered by the issue's embrace by mainstream politicians like Ron DeSantis. And where the far right goes, so do their guns: Militias, gangs, and other groups have been open-carrying firearms at public protests, showing up to drag events and government buildings toting weapons of war. Last year, *The New York Times* analyzed more than 700 armed demonstrations across the country, and found that the right wing was responsible for bringing heat to 77 percent of them, protesting everything from LGBTQ rights to Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 election.

But the far right aren't the only ones showing up armed. Across the country, marginalized individuals are forming groups like the John Brown Gun Club and Socialist Rifle Association that claim to be devoted to the idea of community defense. Their rationale is informed by the massacres at Colorado's Club Q and Florida's Pulse nightclub, and tempered by a long cultural distrust of the police, who they say have repeatedly failed to protect them from – and in some cases even perpetuated – right-wing hate.

Many sources interviewed for this story – particularly those who conceal their identities at protests – asked to use pseudonyms, in fear of being targeted or doxxed by the far right. Others were happy to share their names, judging that their public presence – or concealed-carry permits – shield them from harm. All of them, however, agree on one thing: The other side has guns and is willing to use them. The only answer is to be prepared to shoot back.

"We are a response," one JBGC member says. "We exist as a response to violence."

ON MONDAY, Jason, the owner of Tulips FTW, met with the Elm Fork JBGC before the protesters showed up, and asked them to leave their rifles in their cars. "Weapons beget weapons," he told them. "We do not want things to get ugly."

The presence of guns at a protest – or counterprotest – is a clear escalation of force. "If you bring weapons, you're gearing up for a fight," as Jason puts it. Having armed groups on both sides raises the deadly possibility of a shootout, and puts the more-militant gun clubs in the rare position, for those on the left, of matching the violent tactics of the far right.

At the drag trivia hour, fortunately, things don't get ugly. Various elements of the far right had mobilized on the messaging app Telegram to protest the event, the JBGC members tell me, but rainstorms and a miscommunication about the start time have kept turnout low. Inside Tulips, the event goes on to a packed house.

"It's eye-opening to see the lengths that people are going to to shut us down," show host Salem Moon tells me before going backstage to change into her outfit for the night. "The fact that we're getting to a place where we're pushed into a corner and have to defend ourselves physically ... I didn't think we'd ever get here, but here we are."

Elm Fork, and most JBGC chapters I speak to, usually attend protests or events when they're invited by an organizer or contact within the community, though they do sometimes show up unannounced at events where they know there will be significant right-wing presence. They're not paid for their work, though each operation is carefully planned by a designated "anchor," who takes responsibility for speaking to business owners and organizers as well as more detailed tactical work, like making maps of entrance and exit points of event locations and compiling detailed dossiers on expected right-wing presence and other actors. When I approach Tulips on Monday afternoon, I'm immediately recognized: "Your mustache was a bit heavier in the photo!" a person in black says – I, too, made that day's dossier.

"I wasn't really into guns until Trump got elected," Azad says on the ride over. "But we all know there's Nazis on the streets now. That's why we're here.... The is the Wild fuckin' West, man. We kinda do what we gotta do."

In my months interviewing these groups, it was sometimes surreal to hear them talk without a hint of irony about intelligence dossiers, tactical maps, and weapons load outs on a weekday afternoon in a major American city. How we got here is a complicated story. Marginalized groups in the United States have turned to firearms in order to defend their own communities from hostile actors for decades. In the mid-1960s, the Black Panther Party practiced "cop watching," or sending armed members to tail the police and stand by with weapons drawn when they made an arrest. But as the Democratic Party and liberal-leaning politics coalesced around gun control, the right built up the image that they had a cultural monopoly on violence. That didn't mean left-wing gun groups or apolitical community defense initiatives ceased to exist, but they were shuffled even further outside the bounds of acceptable politics for progressive-leaning Americans, who have for decades emphasized research showing that guns in homes drastically increases the rate of suicides, deaths of minors, and even the likelihood of being fatally assaulted. For the people in these groups, however, the risks are worth it to defend themselves.

The John Brown Gun Clubs operate independently but share a similar ethos: Direct action to counter the threat of the far right, and their members are dedicated to anti-fascism, anti-racism, and anti-bigotry. Most groups I spoke to emphasize that showing up armed is only part of their work, mentioning supply drives for unhoused people during Texas' deep freezes and other mutual-aid events. "The gun stuff doesn't exist without all this other stuff," says one JBGC member who goes by the name Accountant. "If we're going to be carrying guns, there has to be a community reason for it."

Openly leftist, pro-gun organizations like Redneck Revolt, Socialist Rifle Association, and the John Brown Gun Clubs have existed in various forms for close to two decades. The first JBGC was founded in the early aughts, in Lawrence, Kansas, where members advocated for community defense and firearm knowledge, naming their group after the infamous abolitionist John Brown, who led an 1859 revolt against slavery that targeted the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, with the intent of arming escaped and rebelling enslaved people with guns to fight for their own freedom.

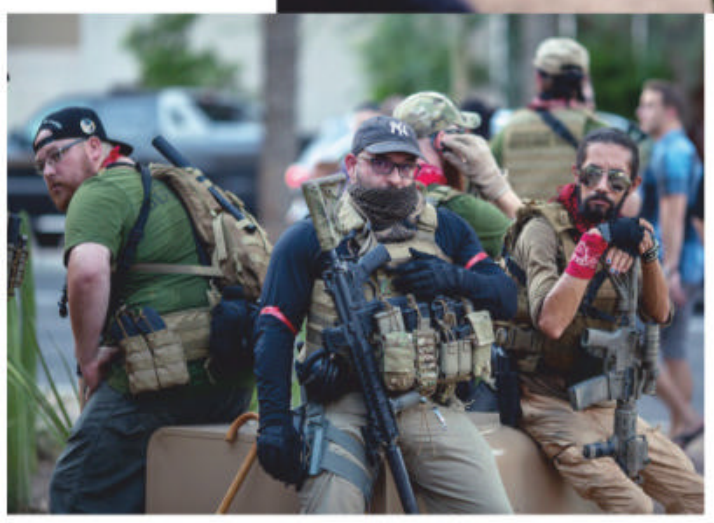
In 2019, the JBGC made headlines when 69-year-old Willem Van Spronsen, a senior member of the Puget Sound chapter, attacked an Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Tacoma, Washington. Van Spronsen infiltrated the property with a semi-automatic rifle and several Molotov cocktails, before being shot and killed by police. Van Spronsen's premeditated attack is a notable exception in the group's history, in which they've rarely participated in violence. But his attack and his farewell letter to another member, in which he wrote, "I am antifa" – a reference to anti-fascist activism – gained attention, in particular, from the right.

Since Van Spronsen's death, the number of active JBGC chapters around the country has increased dramatically, based on dozens of new JBGC Twitter accounts popping up. JBGCs have no central leadership or formal organization, instead operating as a loosely connected network of independent cells. Many members wear a patch with a stylized cartoon of their group's namesake, bordered by the words "I don't argue with people John Brown would have shot." Chapters often range in size from around half a dozen members to more than 20, who are usually vetted through personal connections and in-person meetings before being welcomed in. Still, there are sometimes counterprotesters who show up to public events who aren't members of the clubs – which can lead to confusion.

In fact, a few weeks after I left Texas, the discipline and coordination I saw at Tulips broke down in a dramatic faceoff that was all over the local news. At a drag event outside of a Fort Worth brewery on April 23, three counterprotesters in a group of armed individuals that included JBGC members were arrested. CCTV footage released by the Fort Worth Police Department shows one masked counterprotester approaching a group of unarmed right-wing protesters and pepper-spraying them in their faces. Police, in body armor and carrying rifles of their own, moved to arrest the person, who was charged with multiple accounts of assault, including one on a peace officer. Two other counterprotesters were then arrested.

"I was very disappointed," a member of the LGBTQ community who was there tells me. "If you're going to come fully armed, you have to be security. You can't get in fights. Your duty is to make sure the patrons are safe."

THE DAY AFTER the "Drag Defense" at Tulips, I drive to a gun range about an hour south of Dallas to meet with a group that had contacted me on the encrypted messaging app Signal at Elm Fork's recommendation. My GPS leads me through miles of green, rolling hills, past scattered ranches and into a shallow valley, where my cell service cuts out. The range is a sprawling expanse of pistol and rifle bays cut into the hillside, with huge dirt berms on either side to catch stray fire.



I meet El Gato and Azad, who introduce themselves as the co-founders of Black Cat Rifle Group, a volunteer organization based in Dallas that provides free firearm instruction to anyone who wants it, particularly focusing on marginalized groups. Gato and Azad met through the Socialist Rifle Association, but branched out on their own last year to focus on instruction, around the time Texas' John Brown Gun Clubs started to organize.

Today, they're teaching two young guys – novice shooters looking to dip their toes in. We pile into Gato's hatchback, which is stuffed with paper targets, crates of ammunition, and gun cases, and drive out to a rifle bay, where Gato pulls on army fatigues and a plate carrier. Azad, a tall, bearded South Asian man, dons a chest rig stuffed with AR magazines.

"I wasn't really into guns until Trump got elected," Azad says on the ride over. "But we all know there's Nazis on the streets now. That's why we're here."

Spent shell casings crunch under our feet as we walk over to set up targets. "My community, the South Asian community, has been dealing with this shit for 30 years," Azad says. "Every year, some dude throws a Molotov into a temple, or spray-paints swastikas on our houses."

Gato chimes in. "I don't want to own guns and do this," he says. "But I also don't want someone coming after my wife because she's a person of color."

But in Texas, Azad and Gato say, guns are a necessity – the right wing has them, the law allows them, and being armed is the only way to stay safe.

"This is the Wild fuckin' West, man," Azad says. "We kinda do what we gotta do."

As Black Cat sets up, unloading well over a dozen ARs, AKs, pistols, and antique rifles from several cars, Gato goes over the basic rules of firearm safety with the students: Treat every firearm as if it's loaded, never point a weapon at anything you don't intend to shoot, keep your finger off the trigger until you're ready to fire, and always be aware of your target and what's beyond it.

After some basic lessons in handling a weapon, Gato passes out "ears and eyes": noise-canceling headsets that amplify voices but not gunshots, and safety glasses. He and Azad then run the two students – and me – through basic shooting drills on torso-shaped cardboard targets, working our way up from handguns to modern assault rifles. The range is reserved for the whole day, so other Black Cat members pop in and out throughout the training.

As the afternoon stretches on, it's just Azad, Gato, myself, and a third Black Cat member, who asks to go by the name of Tony. Black Cat puts me through a drill that combines running and shooting with an assault rifle – designed to simulate the experience of shooting in a combat situation when you're out of breath with a racing heart. I've shot before, but never to this degree, and the drills impress upon me both the level of effort involved in safely handling a weapon and the relative ease of pulling the trigger. Shooting is a skill, but the basics are not complicated, which is why Black Cat aims to pass that knowledge on to those who feel they need to defend themselves with a gun.

"Our work is inherently political," Gato says. "But we try to keep politics out of it. If you go into communities of color and start mentioning the word "socialist," it tends to shut every-

WARNING SHOTS Clockwise from top: A JBGC member outside of a drag show; a volunteer of Black Cat Rifle Group, which offers free gun training; the JBGC stands guard at a 2017 Trump rally.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JACK CROSBIE, 2; DAVID MCNEW/GETTY IMAGES

JACK CROSBIE *wrote about Atlanta's "Cop City" in last September's issue.*

thing down. Poor communities don't need any more flak.... A lot of these people already wear a lot of targets on their back. Why give them another?"

The longer I spend with these gun groups, the less consistent their politics seem. They are communists, Marxist-Leninists, socialists, and even a few plain liberals. Some groups, like the Austin-based Veterans for Equality, are largely nonpartisan, counting both leftists and conservatives in their ranks. Some people I speak to think an ideal society would have limitations on personal weapons; others are more strident believers in an armed populace. What unites them, however, is a philosophy that may be difficult to understand for people who are insulated from direct contact with the far right.

"To do this, you don't have to have some specific political end game," Michel, a member of the Austin chapter of the John Brown Gun Club, tells me at a cafe in North Austin one afternoon. Michel is something of an anomaly in the JBGCs – a middle-aged college professor, relatively inexperienced with firearms, and very much not a radical. But he decided armed self-defense was the answer to far-right demonstrations like Charlottesville. "You just have to recognize that there are people who are vulnerable and targeted, and that the state is not going to protect them. You just need to agree on the short term.... Somebody needs to be protecting people."

Though you'll sometimes find these groups working together, there are clear differences of opinion. Veterans for Equality, which formed last year and participates in armed demonstrations in support of sexual-, gender-, and racial-equality causes, does not conceal their faces at protests, unlike most JBGC members.

"I feel like putting on a mask puts some distance between you and the people you're trying to defend and support," Benjamin, a former Army forward observer, tells me in Austin. "It's so much easier to demonize a faceless bad guy, if you're just an antifa supersoldier in black bloc." He's referring to the tactic used for decades by anti-fascist demonstrators in which they wear similar masks and clothing to protect their identity.

Unlike the JBGCs, Veterans for Equality often coordinate with police at demonstrations, hoping to use that relationship to keep things calm. This is not a view shared by most members of the John Brown Gun Clubs, several of whom tell me that police actions often play into the far right's hands. "We wouldn't exist if the police were the organization that people think they are," Han, another member of the Austin JBGC, says.

I meet Han and five others from the Austin chapter in a park in North Austin on a weekday afternoon, just after working hours. Everyone is in their street clothes; a sharp contrast to my first meeting with the Elm Fork members, whose faces I've never, at this point, seen. Like the Elm Fork crew, many of the Austin members say their first experiences of direct action and radical organizing came during the 2020 George Floyd protests. A young, Black bisexual man who goes by the name Accountant describes sneaking out of his parents' house to go to protests and coming back reeking of tear gas; Deviant, a trans woman, describes several personal experiences of abuse by the police and the far right.

"I'm a trans girl in Texas," Deviant says. "I was dealing with ABT [the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas], traffickers, and white-supremacist gangs for years now, and I've been doing it on my own." Before joining the JBGC, Deviant says, she escaped an abusive relationship that exposed her to violence from ABT members and other white nationalists. Now, she says, she's part of a group of people who are "serious and organized and able to stand up for themselves."

The members say the JBGC gives them a sense of security both from the state and from the far right. "If I'm going to be facing a white man who's angry, calling me a n----r, carrying a gun ... it makes no difference if they're wearing a Proud Boy shirt or a badge," says Accountant, who joined the Austin chapter in late 2021. "I like that I'm organizing in a way that probably prevents that risk for someone more marginalized."

"It's important to show up and be public about the fact that these communities aren't vulnerable," Artemis says. "If the queer community is viewed as an armed community, they'll be safer."

After about an hour, Squid, who is tall and slim with long, dirty-blond hair, joins us at the picnic table as the sun starts to set. With some exceptions, the JBGC members I've met are young – early to mid-twenties – and have often already experienced trauma, discrimination, or marginalization.

"Lots of things in society revolve around power," Squid says when I ask what prompted them to join the Austin JBGC. "I'm in one of the groups that does not have a lot of power right now – so everything we can do to defend ourselves, to even that power gap, is important. If somebody [who means me harm] has a gun, I don't want to have a knife."

ON MY LAST NIGHT in Texas, I drive up to Denton, a college town in the northern part of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, to attend a "Trans Joy Celebration" that the Elm Fork JBGC has been asked to provide security for. It's warm and breezy, perfect for an outdoor event. When I arrive, Artemis, a tall, slender trans woman who led the counterprotest at Tulips, and two of her teammates, Moth and Crow, stand to the side of a gaggle of rainbow-clad organizers. They aren't carrying rifles, but wear armor and conceal their faces. The rest of the crowd is in tank tops, dresses, short-shorts. Attendees wave flags as they congregate in a courtyard outside of the Denton City Hall.

As more members arrive, Artemis assigns two-person teams to the courtyard entrances, where they conduct bag checks and scan nearby parking lots with a spotting scope for people loitering in cars or trucks. "I didn't know people would be in bloc here," I hear one attendee say to a friend as they walk in. "I think they're here to do security," the friend replies. "That makes sense."

A few blocks away, an evangelical Christian group hosts a picnic in Denton's central town square. The event looks peaceful and family-friendly, but Artemis has a small team in plain clothes watching it just in case. Despite the lack of obvious threats, Artemis and the group stay vigilant. At one point, during an emotional set of speeches from local trans activists and LGBTQ organizers, two men in short-sleeve collared shirts, cargo shorts, and trucker caps walk up, stand with their arms crossed, and silently observe the celebration. I raise an eyebrow at Artemis. She nods and shrugs, but watches them until they leave a few minutes later.

"I feel safer knowing that they're there, because their interests are my interests," James Jackson, one of the event's organizers, says of the JBGC. "They care about the community as much as I do, if they're willing to carry weapons and protect us. Otherwise we're relying on [the police] – some of whom want us dead."

As dusk falls, the celebration moves from city hall to a patio at a nearby bar. Artemis' team leads the parade of attendees across the street and then secures the area. Everyone else settles in to party. I ask Artemis what it's like sometimes showing up at events where, for the most part, nothing happens. Fully-armed faceoffs between the left and right are still relatively rare.

"It's important to show up and be public about the fact that these communities aren't vulnerable," Artemis says. "If the queer community is viewed as an armed community, they'll be safer."

As the night stretches on with no appearances by hostile actors, the JBGC members relax. Two by two, Artemis gives her people the all clear to change into casual clothes and stand down. It's the first time I've seen any of the Elm Fork members' faces, and I'm struck by how young many of them are. Artemis changes last. Even in street clothes, she checks both entrances to the patio, which she'd visited earlier in the week to speak to the owners of adjacent bars and make a detailed map of entrance and egress points for the public spaces the community had reserved.

"I have become someone who is always looking for threats," Artemis says. "Even when I'm not on the clock, per se, it's very hard to turn off."

For that night, at least, everyone is safe.

PRIDE
2023

JANELLE MONÁE'S

By Mankaprr Conteh

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Justin French

PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

As she releases her most sumptuous album yet, the triple-threat star goes deep on everything from anxiety to AI to how to 'hurry up and live'

Janelle Monáe slides down the front zipper on her onesie,

slings the suit down her back, and wiggles her bare ass toward about 20 of her dear friends.

It's game night at Wondaland West, the homey Los Angeles campus where Janelle works and communes, complete with a studio, living quarters, and an immaculate teal pool nestled within a grove of tropical flora. Janelle's butt makes its appearance via Consequences, a game she requested we play. Her friends Stephanie and Tree invented it when they were visiting Janelle in Greece as she filmed *Glass Onion,* the 2022 murder-mystery comedy in which she plays essentially four starring roles. (It went on to be one of the most popular Netflix movies ever.)

To play Consequences, we flip over a grid of cards they printed up, two at a time, in search of matching pairs; the cards also direct players to endure a series of dares, from simulating sex with someone in the room to pitching an item there like a salesperson. (Several involve downing shots.) We take turns scanning for matches and choosing challenges while sitting in a square in Wondaland's den, where a tan, L-shaped sectional is offset by boxy, burnt-orange armchairs, funky plush dining ones, a sleek, cream lounge chair, and a straddleable sheep.

Josh Dean, a musician and friend of Janelle, has to sightlessly let someone else put a body part in his mouth and guess what it is, so Laura, who I'm told works on game shows, puts her knee on his lips. I elect to moan for the group rather than give them my iMessages to search through.

"Fuck!" yells Janelle, whose cards direct her to either take a body part in her mouth or show us the goods. The decision comes quickly: "I'm 'bout to moon the group!" Loud cheers follow.

"We need some music!" someone shouts.

"Phenomenal," a track from *The Age of Pleasure,* Janelle's upcoming album (due June 9) and first in five years, reverberates through the room. "I'm looking at a thousand versions of myself," she announces over a creeping bass line. "And we're all. Fine. As fuck."

"Phenomenal" Janelle is confident. Game-night Janelle is wavering. "Wait, I have to see if I'm ashy!" she says before running into a bathroom beyond the marble wall. She returns, shimmies out of her pink-and-white striped jumpsuit, adorned with Disney's original Cheshire Cat's stuffed face on the hood and long tail on the back, and shakes her booty shyly. As her friends roar in support and delight, her jitters seem to melt away. The quick wiggle turns into a bit of twerking, and the crowd goes wild.

"Y'all saw that li'l ashy booty!" she shouts.

JANELLE'S BARE BUTT has made a handful of appearances during her 20-year career, like at the 2016 BET Awards, when she tore away snow-white fabric hanging over her backside to reveal assless chaps in tribute to her late mentor, Prince. But naked skin has been a big theme recently, a hallmark of Janelle's new era of liberation, a way to celebrate her autonomy and massive success. You could find her bare torso in recent Instagram Reels. She elegantly wrapped her breasts in beads and mesh this past awards season, and barely covered them with her fingertips for this, her second ROLLING STONE cover. "I'm much happier when my titties are out and I can run around free," says Janelle, who says her pronouns are she/her, they/them, and "*free-ass motherfucker.*"

In 2023, Janelle Monáe Robinson is a singular force: a musician, writer, and actor who's parlayed those triple-threat achievements into culture-shifting, Black feminist, pro-queer stances – and action. She grew up in a working-class, devoutly Baptist family in Kansas City, Kansas, before beginning to make music in Atlanta with people who've become her best friends, like Nate Wonder and Chuck Lightning. Her vision was so clear that Diddy, an admitted control freak, vowed not to interfere with her ideas when he signed her to his label.

On her early albums, Janelle built a fictional Afrofuturist dreamscape that – in the tradition of the genre's great storytellers, like author Octavia Butler – allowed her to contemplate the traumas and possibilities of her own life on Earth. While those works were earning her eight Grammy nominations, she starred in films like *Moonlight* and *Hidden Figures* – both of which were nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars in 2017, with *Moonlight* taking home the gold. "She's extremely gifted," says friend and Oscar winner Lupita Nyong'o. "It's built into her spirit. Her openness creates intimacy onscreen. It's really cool to see her move from one thing to another and do it with such mastery." Along the way, Janelle publicly shared her pansexuality for the first time, in this magazine in 2018, and came out as nonbinary last year, becoming the kind of queer icon many of us wish we'd had more of growing up.

Especially as of late – and this is important – Janelle is also fun as hell, determined to savor the fruits of her labor. She seems positively buoyant these days: the life of the party at enviable bacchanals (many of them hosted at Wondaland West), the centerpiece of this year's NBA All-Star Weekend (scoring several head-turning looks, despite scoring no points in the Celebrity Game), and the most enthusiastic fan in the sprawl of Coachella VIPs. She explains how things have changed on her new single "Float": "I had to protect all my energy/I'm feelin' much lighter now."

At 37, Janelle has reoriented her world around pleasure, trying to consciously enjoy herself, to quiet her mind, to party but also be present. "I think being an artist gets lonely," Janelle tells me. "Most people don't understand what's going on in my brain. Community has been so helpful to me; it's beautiful that I have a title called *The Age of Pleasure* because it actually re-centers me. It's not about an album anymore. I've changed my whole fucking lifestyle."

Still, prioritizing pleasure has its challenges, especially when a world of anxiety lurks somewhere underneath.

AS GAME NIGHT winds down, an impromptu group performance to SWV's 1992 hit "Weak" begins with Janelle belting out the song atop an ottoman, and ends with her and Wonder tucked in a corner of the sectional sofa seriously working out new harmonies for the song. "Weak," of course, is Nineties R&B at its best, but it's particularly special to Janelle. "I remember being in the basement singing with my seven best friends," Janelle notes from atop the furniture. "I didn't know if I could sing, but when I motherfucking mastered that song, I knew I could motherfucking sing."

Staff writer MANKAPRR CONTEH *wrote the Megan Thee Stallion cover story in last summer's double issue.*

PRODUCED BY LYNDA GOLDSTEIN AT PIX PRODUCERS INC. PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA. STYLING BY ALEXANDRA MANDELKORN AT THE WALL GROUP. MARKET EDITOR: EMILY MERCER. HAIR BY NIKKI NELMS AT THE ONLY AGENCY. MAKEUP BY KEITA MOORE AT THE ONLY AGENCY. NAILS BY ANJANETH AGUIRRE. TAILORING BY CHELSEA MCCARROLL. LIGHTING TECHNICIAN: PIERRE BONNET. PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE BY AIDAN TAN. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: XIANG-YUN CHEN. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY ERIK ZIEMBA. FASHION ASSISTANCE BY KYLE RICE. FASHION MARKET ASSISTANCE BY ARI STARK AND KIMBERLY INFANTE. PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE BY BRENDAN MACDEVETTE AND CHRISTIAN CANIZARES. PHOTOGRAPHED AT PIER59 STUDIOS.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
HEADPIECE BY **THE BLONDS**.
RINGS BY **JACQUIE AICHE.**

THIS SPREAD: VEST,
PANTS, AND ACCESSORIES
BY **CHANEL.** JEWELRY BY
JACQUIE AICHE.

“IT’S NOT ABOUT AN ALBUM ANYMORE,” JANELLE SAYS. “I’VE CHANGED MY WHOLE FUCKING LIFESTYLE.”

DRESS, SHOES, AND ACCESSORIES BY **SCHIAPARELLI.**

Game night at Wondaland is soundtracked by all sorts of music: Afropop hits, “Losing You,” by Janelle’s old friend Solange (Janelle helped matchmake Solange’s last marriage), “Persuasive,” by Janelle’s new friend Doechii. Janelle catches a groove and freestyles some bars to an Afrobeats edit of “Work,” by Rihanna, a remix so vibrant and unfamiliar it catches me off guard. Later, Wonder tells me he made the remix that day, especially for the gathering, right before it started. “I’ve gotten used to right before we [have] a night, making new songs to play. See what people think,” he says. That instinct – we’re having a party, so we’ve got to make some music – is exactly how *The Age of Pleasure* came to be.

Janelle, Wonder, and Lightning’s Wondaland Records began in Atlanta as an indie label and artist collective before it grew into a partnership with Epic Records. But in 2020, as the pandemic began to unravel, Janelle recalls, “We were like, ‘Do we want to be in Atlanta writing indoors, or do we want to be around nature and stuff?’ ” Atlanta had practically raised Janelle; Los Angeles was just a place of business. She decided to take Wondaland to California, but she wasn’t sold on L.A. until a brand-new community coalesced around her in the uncertainty of a global crisis.

In the years BC (Before Covid), Janelle attended Everyday People, one of the hottest globe-trekking parties of the Black diaspora. At these parties, the music spans innovative mixes of Afropop, Caribbean gems, house, and hip-hop, the drinks flow, and everyone is getting down on a massive floor. When Everyday People was locked out of venues during the pandemic, Janelle offered it space at Wondaland West. Its courtyard is magnificent, with its tranquil pool in the center and troves of nooks, crannies, outdoor baths, and citrus trees (Janelle insisted on having an orange picked for me the afternoon after game night). With Covid raging, their teams were careful to test partygoers and remain outside.

They would park a DJ by the pool – sometimes Everyday People co-founder mOma, sometimes Janelle’s producer Nana Kwabena – and the yard would fill with beautiful Black creative types, shaking ass. As the world opened up post-2020, Wondaland and Everyday People continued throwing bangers. The 2020 parties inspired Janelle’s new music. The latter ones were labs for it.

Janelle caught the itch to make new music while filming *Glass Onion* through the summer of 2021. Having finally escaped lockdown to stretch her comedic muscle across Greece and Serbia, she was inspired. She knew she wanted to tap into the frequency of her pandemic parties. So she had her producers Wonder and Kwabena send her instrumentals to mull over while she was away. “I just kept dreaming,” says Janelle. “I was like, ‘When I get back, I cannot wait to have a party again.’ ”

Nyong’o attended one in 2021. “It was lit,” she says matter-of-factly. “It was just a different world once you walked through the doors. Everybody’s outfits were extremely well thought out and expressive, and the music was delicious. It felt like we were all craving this kind of event, this kind of … I want to say just reckless abandon.” Nyong’o danced until her feet were sore.

After Janelle settled back in the States after filming, the parties became more strategic – a place to test

out new material. "I was like, 'OK, if we have a party in spring of 2022, I want to have records ready,' " Janelle explains. " 'I want to honor this experience, and be really specific about it.' The best way to figure it out? 'Let's play that shit at the party.' "

Once there, they never called attention to Janelle's new music, slipping it into Kwabena's DJ sets as seamlessly as they could. "We were super specific around tempo," says Janelle. "We were like, 'Nana, you're at that 82 BPM, or that at 92 BPM,' the songs have to start there." Were there any lulls when she worked her stuff in? "Not really."

The Age of Pleasure is a Blackity-Blackass album. It traverses the realms of music that are indisputably ours. This time, instead of sci-fi metropolises, Janelle leans into the worlds we live in. "It was inspired by all of my friends, my community of folks who are from South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, the Caribbean, Atlanta, L.A., Chicago," Janelle says. "Seeing all of us together in our Blackness, in the love that we had in our eyes for each other. People from the continent fuck around with trap from Atlanta. You know what I'm saying? I love how the diaspora – we talk to each other."

"Float" features the grand brass of Nigeria's Seun Kuti and Egypt 80, a legacy of Kuti's father, Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti. Janelle says that when Seun heard *The Age of Pleasure* in full, he told her, "I hear my dad." The album also includes Sister Nancy, the Jamaican dancehall legend behind the immortal 1982 hit "Bam Bam," as well as classic Black American actress Nia Long and Ghanaian American singer Amaarae. New Afrobeats act CKay visited Wondaland to guest on the slinky, waist-whining "Know Better," while Doechii, the rapper set to take the mantle at Kendrick Lamar's former label, came by to lend her voice to "Phenomenal." It evokes both a sweaty night of South African amapiano and a fiercely queer New York ballroom scene.

"I want things to feel so true to my life," Janelle explains. "I used to consider myself a futurist. I know what that means, to obsess about the next thing. A present tourist is what I'm calling myself right now. I'm actively focusing on being present."

HEAD OF GAME NIGHT, Janelle and I have our first one-on-one in Wondaland West's studio. It has its own living space beyond a wall, cozy but striking. Lush plants are set off against elegant wood accents, rustic floors, and floor-to-ceiling shelves full of vinyl: Prince's *Controversy,* David Bowie's *Scary Monsters,* and Aretha Franklin's *Amazing Grace* among them. I spot at least three guitars, a polished black upright piano next to a tasteful canvas of a topless, buxom woman sketched in black pencil, and another sheep for sitting.

Janelle sits at the recording desk in her onesie, her tuft of natural short black hair pulled back in a messy bun – it's not hairstyle-messy, it's I-woke-up-like-this messy. About an hour into our conversation there, she excuses herself to dart out of the room and returns with a joint. "I just always wanted to be in an interview but be lit up," she says, playful and serious at once. She fidgets with the jay and begins to smoke, but something is missing.

"Do you need an ashtray?" I ask her.

"I do. See, you can tell I'm a rookie."

Janelle likes weed and she likes shrooms, the latter of which fits her as a pretty naturally trippy person, and also doesn't run the risk of ruining her voice. "I grew up fearful of marijuana because I had parents who were addicts," Janelle also explains, referring particularly to her dad's formerly debilitating crack-cocaine use. "They would always say, 'Weed is the gateway drug to being a crackhead,' and I grew up with that in my mind and heart."

When Covid hit, she got curious about weed as a way to manage her anxiety. She's discussed having full-on "anxiety attacks" while making 2018's *Dirty Computer.* "I was like, 'We're in the middle of a pandemic,' " she says. " 'I'm not on the road, let me test out weed.' "

Janelle recently diagnosed herself with OCD, which she connects to a lifelong pattern of perfectionism. She told the podcast *TransLash,* a show for and by transgender and gender-nonconforming people, that her perfectionism stems from struggling with abandonment and rejection from her father during his addiction (though the two are now close). "I started to have this unhealthy relationship with being perfect, so that nobody would leave me," she told the show.

She's doing a lot of work to heal those wounds. "I know how to coach myself if it comes up again," she says to me before ruminating on what lingers. "But all of that I think made me.... And in OCD ... if something isn't exactly how I see it, in my mind, it's trash." She started therapy as soon as she started making good money, and now works with an "emotional-support coach," a good friend who's delved into mental-wellness work. Janelle tries to meet with her once a week.

There was a particularly taxing period last year when her extensive *Glass Onion* press run overlapped with work on *The Age of Pleasure,* spreading her thin. "In those moments, I have to have someone helping me work through my schedule, helping me not feel guilty about saying no to something, because all this affects your mental health," she explains. Janelle gets indignant when she thinks of how rare mental-health resources are for others. "Not a lot of people have the luxury of saying or doing what it is I'm doing. I think that therapy, life coaching included, should be free for every American," she says. "There's so many people walking around wounded emotionally. We would be better as a country, as a planet, if everybody had the access."

Some of the tools she's garnered from therapy help her manage the ADHD she was diagnosed with as an adult. There's darker stuff, too, that she's not ready to divulge yet, but has hinted at. When she accepted the Trevor Project's Suicide Prevention Advocate of the Year Award last September, she called herself "someone who has dealt with depression." "I think I'll have a moment where I will talk a little bit more freely about it," she says. "But I absolutely have had very tough times internally, even career-wise, that I've privately dealt with and had to come out of."

Trying to live in pleasure as a "present tourist" has been a light. "It's not easy," she says. "You have to train your thoughts."

I get it. We talk about my own bouts of depression and subsequent periods of happiness. "I would be nervous," I told her. "Why do I feel good? And is something going to go wrong again?"

"Oh, my God, I swear you're in my head," she says. She gets it.

With an album on the way, she's fending off panic, for now. "The old me would be freaking out," she says. She's juggling visual treatments and rehearsing the new album – she wants to perform it at pop-ups she's considering calling Pleasure Parties. Plus, with its new experiences with film and television, her production company, Wondaland Pictures, is exploring new ways to advance the sci-fi saga of Cindi Mayweather, the android character from several of Janelle's albums who falls in love with a human and is hunted for it. Cindi's defiance becomes messianic, inspiring hope and rebellion across the futuristic urban landscape Janelle created on the records. The Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture even recently came to her to borrow Cindi Mayweather relics for their new Afrofuturism exhibit. "I want my *Star Wars,*" she says. "As a writer, as a storyteller, as an actor, to be able to do the soundtrack that's rooted from works that I wrote."

"I've told her I need a Janelle Monáe-written and -directed sci-fi movie in my life, and I need it soon," says Rian Johnson, who directed *Glass Onion.* While making the film, Janelle's commitment to storytelling even shone off set – like when Johnson would throw murder-mystery parties for the cast. "Janelle would show up," he says, "dressed in a top hat and monocle and a detective's cape. She invented a full character with a backstory and had an accent. She didn't drop the character for a long, long time into the evening. It would definitely hit a point in the night where [she'd be called 'Janelle'] and she'd be like, 'You mean Lord Wimplebody the Third? Yes? How may I help you?' "

Johnson is eager to collaborate with her again. "The next thing I'm doing is probably the next Benoit Blanc mystery," he says, referring to Daniel Craig's character in the *Knives Out* series. "I was about to say, 'I guess she can't be in that,' but I don't know, maybe she'll show up as Lord Pedigrew the Third."

As someone who straddles the music industry and Hollywood, Janelle has a unique perspective on the major obstacles in both. "I think both industries have a lot of fucking work to do," she says, sharply. "There are a lot of systemic things that need to change."

Janelle was a vocal supporter of the Time's Up movement that spawned from revelations of assault, discrimination, and harassment across Hollywood; onstage at the Grammys in 2018, she helped shepherd Time's Up into the music industry. In March, her nonprofit supporting the personal and academic development of girls and nonbinary youth, Fem the Future, announced it would be expanding with a grant from Warner Music Group.

Even as the purview of Janelle's work has grown from music to movies to philanthropy and beyond, she most focused on being creative – and being herself. "The old version of how I would do interviews is I would've been in some black and white, and maybe I would've put a little makeup on. But I was like, 'You know what? I actually don't have ...' " she trails off to get kindly blunt. "Not that I don't care about this interview. But I don't have the mental capacity to be anything other than who I am." She does, however, have small hexagons of translucent glitter pilled at the corners of her eyes. I ask her why. [*Cont. on 75*]

BODYSUIT AND
EARRINGS BY
AREA.

PRIDE 2023

CAN'T TAKE THEIR CROWNS

Drag queens are under legislative attack in multiple states. But they're refusing to give up the art form that makes them feel free

By Jon Freeman & Tomás Mier

Kerri Colby

FOR KERRI COLBY, drag was like the wardrobe in *The Chronicles of Narnia*: Once she stepped inside that world, she could embrace who she truly was. "I was able to find a light in me that always existed but I was never able to see before I transitioned," she says. Colby was raised in Dallas by a Pentecostal Christian family who rejected her identity from the get-go. She believes faithful Christians like her family "mean well" in following the Bible's teachings, but they miss the point of the Scripture: "It's about compassion and being a living example of the golden rule," she explains. Despite recent legislative efforts in states like Texas to "ostracize and limit the visibility of trans people," Colby intends to live proudly as a trans woman and be the "hug that I once needed" for others like her. By standing strong, she says, she's carrying on the teachings of her drag mom, Sasha Colby, the reigning queen of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. "I see her art form to be more of a ministry than an entertaining performance," Kerri says. "She was one of the first examples of a trans woman being so fearless. That's always stuck with me." T.M.

NOLWEN CIFUENTES

PRIDE 2023

Mistress Isabelle Brooks

"TRADITIONAL DRAG is a dying art form," says Mistress Isabelle Brooks, "and I feel like it's my job to keep it alive." With her glamour and unapologetic candor, the Houston native was a fan favorite to take the last season of *Drag Race*. She didn't, but no matter: "Regardless of who won the crown, I am the winner." Brooks built that armor-like confidence thanks to the "tumultuous" relationship she had with her Mexican American family. Growing up, she never identified with the machismo they tried to instill in her, but says she was "never fearful of being myself." While attending cosmetology school as a teen, Brooks discovered drag on Tumblr and would sneak out to see the drag luminary Chevelle Brooks perform at local gay clubs. As she started to do drag herself, she jokes, she "bullied" Chevelle into being her drag mom. Now, Brooks hopes to continue putting old-school drag on the map as she plots a tour across the U.S. "Drag allows me to be a heightened version of myself," she says. "I want people to be like, 'Oh, my God, is she real?' " As for the detractors: "I truly am praying for you. Y'all must be miserable." T.M.

LOCATION COURTESY OF SOUTH BEACH IN HOUSTON, TEXAS

LEANN MUELLER

Aura Mayari

AURA MAYARI immigrated to the U.S. with her family from the Philippines when she was young, and grew up in Chicago. She tried to assimilate but was sometimes teased about her English pronunciation. Drag – which she got a taste for while playing Angel in *Rent* – became a way to reconnect with her roots: Her stage name is Filipino in origin. "[Aura] describes somebody who's over-the-top, very confident," she explains. "And 'Mayari' is Filipino mythology about a moon goddess." Not long after Mayari moved to Nashville in 2020, the gay club Play extended an offer for her to become a cast member at its drag shows. Four months later, she tried out for *Drag Race* and joined the series' 15th season. Now, she stays busy traveling to high-profile bookings and recording original music. She's looking at an uncertain future with Tennessee's new drag restrictions, but wishes everyone had a chance to feel the therapeutic benefits of drag that she's experienced. "[Drag] has done so much for me as a person," she says. "It's helped me find my purpose. And it's been my sanctuary. That's what they don't really see." J.F.

JUSTIN J WEE

PRIDE 2023

Crystal Methyd

"THE DEVIL IS how they view us, but I make it glamorous and beautiful," says Crystal Methyd, explaining her look for this shoot. The "they" she refers to are the conservative Christian voices whose war on drag has sent protesters to picket some of her shows across the South, forcing police to escort her and other queens out of venues. "People fear what they don't know," she says. "It's frustrating that they are trying to put their beliefs onto others. It's just like, 'Live and let be.' If you don't like it, don't buy a ticket." Methyd was a drag pioneer in her hometown of Springfield, Missouri. In 2015, she founded Get Dusted, a monthly event there – hosted at a straight club – where she helped baby queens and even straight guys get into drag for the first time. ("At a venue they've been [to], they'll let loose faster," she recalls thinking.) It revitalized the city's drag scene. "[Drag] used to be my escape, now it's my everything," she says. Despite drag's growing ranks of detractors, Methyd won't stop portraying the character that landed her in the top three of *Drag Race*: "It just unlocks all the secrets inside you." T.M.

PHYLICIA JL MUNN

Dusty Ray Bottoms

AS A CHILD in Kentucky and southern Indiana, Dusty Ray Bottoms loved to reenact scenes from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. "I would put on my housecoat as Belle's dress," she says. "That is drag. That was just me by myself having unabashed joy." In her conservative Christian home, though, that self-expression soon met resistance. When she was 20, Dusty Ray came out to her family as gay and was sent to conversion therapy – an experience that would come to inform her onstage persona. "My drag was the way that I was able to dig deep through a lot of unprocessed trauma," she says. In 2015, she won Bob the Drag Queen's first Look Queen event with a haunting number about being told she was "demon-possessed." She's also featured in the new documentary *Conversion,* about survivors of that therapy. Bottoms and her spouse moved back to Indiana from New York City during the pandemic to reconnect with family. She performs at a family-friendly drag brunch in Louisville, where a bill restricting drag shows in the presence of children failed to pass this session. "We got lucky," she says. "We have a lot of work ahead. We have to keep raising our voices." J.F.

HATSUE

Vidalia Anne Gentry

VIDALIA ANNE GENTRY left her hometown of Nashville for college and grad school, earning degrees in musical performance for viola. But when she returned to Tennessee, her drag persona blossomed. "It was the intersection of that performance energy and that artistic expression," she says. (To honor her roots, she chose a beloved Southern cooking staple – what she calls "the supreme onion" – for her first name.) One of the first queens to expand her work outside of Nashville's gay clubs, Gentry is a pioneer in the city. Even so, she reveres the storied past of Nashville drag, from the mid-Nineties drag bar Cowboys LaCage to the late, great performer and activist Bianca Paige, a seropositive advocate for HIV funding and research. "That's the kind of thing I want to leave behind as well," Gentry says. To that end, she's been on the front lines fighting Tennessee's new laws – and has a theory as to why the state has keyed in on drag and trans rights: "Both of those things insist upon self-expression and individuality," she says. "Fascism is threatened by both of those things." She adds, "For me, this is personal." J.F.

DIANA KING

INSIDE THE FIGHT TO KEEP A FLORIDA COLLEGE QUEER

New College students protesting actions by the new board.

Ron DeSantis staged a hostile takeover of an LGBTQ oasis. Then students dug in

BY TESSA STUART

WITH FEWER THAN 700 undergraduates, New College of Florida's student body is small enough that most of it fits on one reply-all email thread. On Jan. 6, the day news broke that Gov. Ron DeSantis had installed a knot of culture-war veterans to the school's board of trustees, the forum lit up: "What the hell is going on?" "How are we going to fight back?" "This is crazy." Almost as quickly, screenshots of those messages began gleefully circulating on right-wing Twitter, prompting some students to move their communications to an encrypted channel, a small cell of resistance that has spent the semester trying to figure out how to save their tiny, public, liberal-arts college from what they call a "fascist" takeover.

Set on 110 palm-dotted acres at the edge of Sarasota Bay, New College of Florida was founded in the Sixties by a band of locals with a vision to liberate students and faculty from the "limits of lock-step curriculum." The school eschews grades, prizing hands-on learning. It is the Florida university system's honors college, known for producing Fulbright scholars and more Ph.D.s per capita than almost any other undergraduate program in the country (including Princeton, Harvard, and Yale). It has never had competitive sports but does have a mascot: the "null set" – a pair of empty brackets.

New College is also known as a uniquely accepting and supportive place for queer folks – trans students in particular. Students, faculty, and staff have spent years cultivating a climate "supportive of all genders" and "unwilling to tolerate transphobia," as Emily Fairchild, associate director of undergraduate studies for Harvard's sociology department, wrote in a 2022 volume of research on transgender experiences. "The great heartbreak," Fairchild, who worked at New College for more than a decade, says today, "is that that core mission is threatened by what [the trustees] are doing right now."

In January, DeSantis' emissaries began transforming this "social-justice ghetto," as new trustee Christopher Rufo – a driving force behind the GOP's critical-race-theory panic – dubbed the school, into what a DeSantis aide called a "Hillsdale of the South." Hillsdale is a tiny Christian college in Michigan whose campus is decorated with statues of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, whose graduates have gone on to write Donald Trump's speeches, hammer out Kevin McCarthy's strategy, and help draft opinions by Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas.

The board began by firing the college's beloved president, Patricia Okker, before forcing out its provost and its chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion officer. They disbanded the DEI office entirely. In Okker's place, the board installed Richard Corcoran, former speaker of the Florida House of Representatives. A longtime Republican aide in Tallahassee and wife of the former chair of the Republican Party of Florida was put in charge of the college's foundation. The former president of the Florida Senate was installed as general counsel. A GOP operative who worked under Corcoran in the DeSantis administration was tapped to lead admissions. They hired a baseball coach, formerly employed by one of the trustees, to institute a sports program as athletic director.

Amid the upheaval, students organized rallies, teach-ins, town halls, and trips to Tallahassee to lobby legislators against the changes. But their efforts have done little to slow the takeover of their campus. Conversations with lawmakers have all played out roughly the same way, one student explains: "We hear you, but we disagree, and we're gonna continue not listening to you." (A rep for New College says the recent changes "have generally been accepted by the larger campus community.")

So now, they're trying alternative means of subverting the top-down changes. Greek life, for example, has "not been a part of campus culture – ever," third-year student Chai Leffler says. "But the way [we're] going about it is like, 'All right, if we're going to have a sports team, let's make it the gayest, most loud sports team we can.' If there are going to be fraternities and sororities, well, there are very LGBTQ-inclusive [ones] we can be a part of." For the first time, this year New College is holding a Pride event. (Before, it never felt necessary, Leffler says: "Going to school at New College *is* a Pride event.")

Like a lot of his classmates, Leffler has considered transferring. But he is a Pell Grant and Bright Futures recipient, so his education is essentially free; even with the offers other schools have extended to vulnerable New College students, leaving doesn't make financial sense for him.

At a board meeting in late April, Corcoran said roughly 100 students had enrolled for the 2023 freshman class – a figure he characterized as "a little bit down from last year." (The ideal size for a New College class, Corcoran said, is closer to 400.) The board also announced it was denying tenure to all five faculty members who applied – a decision expected to result in a faculty exodus this summer, too. In May, the gender-neutral signs on campus bathrooms began disappearing. A new vendor started serving coffee out of the campus cafe in cups affixed with a Bible verse.

For students like Leffler with no choice but to stay, the changes are only hardening their resolve. On the encrypted thread there is talk of occupying buildings on campus, among other direct actions. But leaving may end up being the most powerful act of all. Says Madi Markham, a fourth-year enrollee graduating this spring, "I think [the board] didn't consider the fact that, like, they need students to run a school."

OCTAVIO JONES/REUTERS/REDUX

Adeem the Artist

COUNTRY COMES OF THE CLOSET

For decades, Nashville has been hostile to queer artists. Now, a handful of musicians and songwriters are leading the way to acceptance

BY JON FREEMAN

WHEN BRANDY CLARK launched a country-music recording career in 2013, there wasn't any template for an openly gay artist in Nashville. Despite co-writing hits like Kacey Musgraves' "Follow Your Arrow," Clark heard loud and clear the industry's messages that she wouldn't be supported as an out performer. Even Chely Wright, who had big radio hits in the Nineties, had been forced to wait years and change stylistic directions before she came out publicly. "One of the things that was hard for me to grasp was [the idea that] you can be a successful songwriter and be out of the closet, but you won't be able to have a successful career as an artist," Clark says. "So I let that dream go."

Since then, country music's traditional barriers to entry have begun to erode. Clark is now signed out of Warner's L.A. office and has found a growing audience. Even more LGBTQ talent is appearing on major and indie rosters, including Grammy favorite Brandi Carlile, TJ Osborne of the CMA-winning duo Brothers Osborne, and relative newcomers like Lily Rose and Brooke Eden, and numerous artists are making headway working outside that system. Country is slowly becoming a more-welcoming space for all.

Clark has been at the forefront of that shift, and credits her friendship with Shane McAnally – one of Nashville's most successful songwriters, who is also gay – with giving her the confidence to pursue a solo career. "When I met him, I was out, but I didn't lead with it. And I remember thinking, 'Wow, he leads with it,' " Clark says, noting that McAnally could walk into a room with a bunch of camo-wearing, arrow-straight men and emerge with a great country song. "I always thought it was brave of him, so it made me braver."

PRIDE 2023

Over the course of a few albums and writing songs with McAnally for the new Broadway musical *Shucked*, Clark has become adamant about being visible. "Who knows who's going to be listening to me in the fly-over states," she says, "that's going to draw strength from, 'Oh, she's gay too? Man, if she's gay and doing that, maybe I could do that.' "

Chris Housman is one of a newer generation of young country songwriters who takes inspiration from Clark's and McAnally's work. The Kansas native's best-known song, 2021's "Blueneck," has been at the nexus of topical and viral: It came loaded with an irresistible hook and endlessly clever lines about being progressive in a red state. "George Strait or George Gay, there's no difference," sings Housman, who now lives in Nashville. He also tackled his religious upbringing in "Bible Belt" and, in response to Tennessee's anti-drag legislation, in March penned a pop-country banger called "Drag Queen" ("Every now and then," he sings, "Michael becomes Michelle").

Like a lot of queer performers in country and folk music, Housman is working mainly on his own, without the help of major firms or even indie labels. "Though a lot of people in the industry support me from a distance, there's a difference between that and actually taking some steps to push that further and sign some [gay artists]," Housman says.

Independent labels have generally been more welcoming. Fantasy Records released *Outside Child*, the groundbreaking 2021 roots album by Allison Russell, who identifies as queer, while trans singer Mya Byrne signed to the Nashville wing of legendary punk label Kill Rock Stars to drop her album *Rhinestone Tomboy*. Knoxville, Tennessee-based Adeem the Artist, who is nonbinary, released their 2022 album, *White Trash Revelry,* via indie stalwart Thirty Tigers, a feat that defied their expectations. "When I came out, especially when I changed my pronouns, I remember thinking, 'I think I just tanked my career,' " they say. "And then I experienced this wealth of support, perhaps at the risk of some tokenization, that catapulted me forward."

In June, Adeem, who has toured with Josh Ritter and American Aquarium, will make their Grand Ole Opry debut, evidence that while the industry tends to move slowly on these matters, it's not sitting stat-

(JUSTIN J WEE/"THE NEW YORK TIMES"/REDUX

ic. Another sign of progress: CMT, the cable-TV network with a country audience, has thrown unambiguous support behind the LGBTQ community of late. At the 2023 CMT Music Awards in April, co-host Kelsea Ballerini performed her song "If You Go Down (I'm Going Down Too)" surrounded by a group of drag queens, a defiant stand against laws targeting queens and trans people in Texas (where the show took place), Tennessee, and beyond. The company has also co-created initiatives designed to level the playing field in country music, like the Equal Access Development Program, which offers training, funding, and industry access for country artists from marginalized communities. "[It's] so important to show that today's country music is for everyone," says Leslie Fram, CMT's senior vice president of music and talent.

Last year, the network presented an anniversary party for the Black Opry Revue – a collective that seeks to elevate Black artists working in country and Americana music – featuring performances by queer-identifying artists like Jett Holden, Autumn Nicholas, and the Kentucky Gentlemen. Holly G, the Black Opry's founder and co-director, formed the organization to create a safe outlet for diverse artists and fans, including the LGBTQ community. "I [wanted] to make sure Black Opry took care of both of those intersections," Holly G says. "I'm queer myself, so I feel like it's baked into the way we operate."

As LGBTQ civil rights have come under attack, some have asked the Black Opry to become more involved in political activism – an ask that has Holly G recalibrating her thinking. "It was never my intention to be any type of activist," she says. "I was just trying to find a safe space to exist in the music industry. I just wanted to be able to go to concerts."

It's a far-too-common story – the marginalized doing the hard labor to be recognized while being tossed into activist roles on top of it. Their straight counterparts typically don't have to do the same. As Adeem the Artist puts it, "I'm a reluctant activist. I want to make good country music. That's the heart of what I do."

Still, with a vibrant community that's commanding the industry to pay attention, country music's queer entertainers are moving things forward, together. "Those are my people," Adeem says. "I love them to death." Ⓡ

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: RICK DIAMOND/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN MAZUR/WIREIMAGE; KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES; MICK HUTSON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN MAZUR/WIREIMAGE; ZIK IMAGES/UNITED ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES

THE MOST POWERFUL PRIDE ANTHEMS OF ALL TIME

From dance-floor classics to soaring ballads, from Xtina to Gloria Gaynor — these songs are built to provide a sense of hope and freedom that carries the community through tough times BY TIM CHAN

1
Born This Way
Lady Gaga

Few artists have impacted the LGBTQ community quite like Lady Gaga, and few songs capture the joy and resilience of that community like this one. Heed Gaga's words: "We were all born superstars."

2
Beautiful
Christina Aguilera

Aguilera's anthemic 2002 ballad ends with a resounding resolve: "Don't you bring me down today." She recently received GLAAD's Advocate for Change award.

3
Firework
Katy Perry

This hit from Perry's 2010 blockbuster, *Teenage Dream*, is as bright and uplifting as its title, a celebratory track that encourages listeners to release their inner sparkle and let their colors shine.

4
Follow Your Arrow
Kacey Musgraves

"Kiss lots of boys, or kiss lots of girls, if that's something you're into," Musgraves sings on this 2013 country hit. It was a landmark moment of acceptance in a politically conservative genre.

5
Chosen Family
Rina Sawayama

With lyrics that offer solace to the queer community, pop rebel Sawayama's signature song received a co-sign (and remix) from one of the biggest LGBTQ stars of all time — Sir Elton John himself.

6
I Know a Place
Muna

An uplifting reminder that home is where you make it out to be, and with whom you choose to make it. The Los Angeles indie-pop band wrote it in 2015, with Pride Week in mind.

7
True Colors
Cyndi Lauper

It's been covered by everyone from Phil Collins to the cast of *Glee*, but the original remains a staple, thanks to Lauper's heartfelt delivery and promise that listeners will never have to live in the shadows again.

8
Brave
Sara Bareilles

Viola Davis once said her greatest fear is going to her grave and thinking, "I was not brave." Her Broadway peer Bareilles' 2013 hit is a courageous rallying cry to "say what you want to say" before it's too late.

9
Freedom
George Michael

Michael's Nineties hit was both a statement on his own sexual liberation and a call to arms for people everywhere to free themselves from self-doubt and despair.

10
I Will Survive
Gloria Gaynor

A defiant disco anthem, "I Will Survive" has long soundtracked queer gatherings as both a declaration of independence and a kiss-off to haters.

Sennott (left) and Edebiri take a few hits to meet the girls of their teenage dreams.

ORION PICTURES INC.

THE HORNY TEEN COMEDY IS HERE - LESBIAN

How Emma Seligman's new movie *Bottoms* flips every teen-movie trope on its side

BY KERENSA CADENAS

THE OPENING SCENE of *Bottoms* sees a pair of high school best friends getting ready together for the first big social event of their senior year – the "carnival" – horny as hell and fantasizing about finally hooking up with their crushes. It's a classic teen-movie setup, the kind we've seen from the hallowed John Hughes era to the late-Nineties boom of films like *American Pie* and *Can't Hardly Wait*. But immediately, we realize this movie is serving up something different. The outcast besties are PJ (Rachel Sennott) and Josie (Ayo Edebiri), and the classmates they're lusting over aren't the school's football stars – they're the cheerleaders. The minute the girls get into the carnival, PJ tries spitting some game at Brittany (Kaia Gerber), but instead of laying on the charm, she chokes. Thus is born a new twist on an archetype: the desperate, dorky queer virgin.

It shouldn't feel so novel to see queer women centered as horndog losers. But that's a wrong director Emma Seligman (*Shiva Baby*), who co-wrote *Bottoms* with Sennott, was looking to right. "I just wanted to have relatable queer characters onscreen," says Seligman, who identifies as bisexual and nonbinary. "We've made so many strides in queer representation, but I'm excited to see more, especially teen queer characters that have sex drives and are horny and flawed and not just these innocent beings that are either being traumatized or having the most sweet, PG love story."

PJ and Josie have flaws aplenty, and their traumas are mercifully limited to standard high school humiliations. After a dust-up with the star quarterback, the duo petition the school to let them start a self-defense club for girls, based on a lie that they became expert fighters while in juvenile hall over the summer. Their real goal: Use the club to get close to their crushes and finally get laid. From there, the action ratchets up, with hilarious set pieces featuring the girls kicking the shit out of each other, an exploding car, and a genius comedic turn by ex-NFL player Marshawn Lynch, a.k.a. Beast Mode, as a clueless history teacher. The movie won raves at the SXSW Film Festival in March, and will open in limited release Aug. 25.

Back in April 2017, Seligman and Sennott had just finished shooting the short *Shiva Baby* – which three years later would morph into Seligman's critical-darling feature debut – and were dying to work with each other again. (Seligman was drawn to Sennott's sense of humor and ambition, calling her "such a Virgo.") Seligman had a lone, loose idea in her head: "It was just a teen-sex comedy, but for queer girls, and they're fighting or they're heroes or something, but I don't know what it is." Sennott was down for a raunchy female comedy. So, while Seligman worked on the feature-length *Shiva Baby*, the pair began slowly plotting out what would become *Bottoms*. "We worked on this big whiteboard and just put all these things up there, and one of them was *Fight Club*," Sennott says. "Another thing was [a] bomb." She adds with a laugh, "So, just little girly things."

Seligman knew immediately that Sennott, who starred in *Shiva Baby* as the titular character Danielle, a young bisexual Jewish woman who pays her bills as a sugar baby while trying to figure out her mess of a life, would nail the outgoing, ridiculous, and sometimes cruel PJ. And Sennott was up for the challenge. "I was excited to play PJ because I feel like it's difficult to like her," she explains. "She's pretty mean and a tough cookie to crack."

As for the quieter and more introspective Josie – the character Sennott calls "the heart of the film" – the writing partners felt from the start that Sennott's frequent collaborator Edebiri was the only choice. All three women had attended New York University at the same time, and Seligman says from her first encounter with Edebiri, she had an inkling that she could play the character: "I met her at an NYU salon," Seligman says of the actor, a breakout star of last year's smash-hit series *The Bear* who's also voiced Missy on the animated show *Big Mouth*. "She made a *Downton Abbey* joke that bombed, and no one laughed but me. She was just so awkward and weird and adorable, and I had a thought in my mind, 'If I ever made that high school thing, that's Josie.' "

Her gut proved right. Once Edebiri signed on and began consulting on the script, Seligman says, Josie began to really jump off the page. The character grows over the course of the film to become less passive and more willing to challenge her

childhood bestie as the girls develop warring thoughts on the fight club – friction that lends itself to some of the movie's best comedy. "[It was exciting] getting to do something where there's a co-dependence," Edebiri says. "And that is such a sticky age, where you are experiencing a lot of internal changes that you don't have the language for, especially when there's somebody you've known for what feels like your whole life, and there's things that you just won't talk about, or you don't talk about, that can make things more explosive."

The film shot in April 2022 in New Orleans. Seligman's first studio film, it was a wildly different experience from making her indie *Shiva Baby*. There was a crew of more than 200, action set pieces, stunts. Seligman choreographed the fights along with her director of photography, Maria Rusche, and the cast was put through a fight-club boot camp led by stunt coordinator Devin Stovall. "The first day of training with Devin, it was all the actresses in a room, and we just all started pushing each other on the mat," Sennott says. "And I was like, 'I can't believe the script that we wrote is happening.' " The New Orleans climate brought biblical locust swarms and thunderstorms that helped make for a memorable shoot – as did Lynch's lessons on how to throw a spiral during downtime on set. Postproduction, Seligman brought in Charli XCX, whose "sexy and innovative" music they'd listened to while writing the film, to do the score and soundtrack.

In the finished product, the seed of what Seligman and Sennott imagined six years ago grew into exactly what they've longed to see onscreen: queer women who are shitty and awkward and weird – or, in other words, real people. "That was really important to me and Emma," Sennott says, "letting female characters and queer characters be kind of the worst. I mean, I love [PJ and Josie], I think they're the best, but they're also so annoying."

Ultimately, of course, they knew none of it would work unless the comedy grabbed the audience and didn't let go. "It [was] important to us [to be] making a movie that's centering young queer women of different interests and different identities," Edebiri explains. "But also, let us be here and laugh at us and laugh with us. That's the main priority, is laughter." Put another way, she says, "it's a political act to be stupid." RS

SACHA LECCA

BETWEEN THE COVERS

Queer stories are taking over literature. Here are some of our favorite new reads

Big Swiss
Jen Beagin

SCRIBNER, OUT NOW

After a failed relationship, Greta moves into a dilapidated house in Hudson, New York, and meets Big Swiss — a woman she falls for while transcribing therapy sessions for a slightly nutty sex coach. What develops is a twisty, push-and-pull relationship between the two women that is wildly funny and unexpectedly sexy.

Dykette
Jenny Fran Davis

HENRY HOLT AND CO., OUT NOW

If you're an LGBTQ person who's ever lived in Brooklyn, you'll probably see yourself in this biting tale of two young queer couples who go upstate with an older lesbian couple. If you've only heard about prototypical Brooklynites — their self-indulgent privilege and ridiculous thoughts on art and culture — you'll still find plenty to cringe and laugh at.

People Collide
Isle McElroy

HARPERVIA, OUT SEPT. 26

With their first novel, *The Atmospherians*, McElroy sharply sliced through knotty questions about toxic masculinity. Their second deftly explores partnership, identity, and sex through Eli, a man who wakes up to find his wife, Elizabeth, has disappeared, and he's now in her body. Told with their signature satirical humor, McElroy explores a relationship that has soured and how literally experiencing life in another's shoes can reveal the truth of who we are.

Your Driver Is Waiting
Priya Guns

DOUBLEDAY, OUT NOW

A novel that calls itself a gender-flipped *Taxi Driver* has big shoes to fill, but this steely dissection of the gig economy succeeds. It anchors the story of Damani, a ride-share driver taking care of her mom amid mass protests. Worlds collide when she meets Jolene, a rich white girl whose politics look good on paper. But when Jolene does an unforgivable thing, it kicks off an intense series of events.

The Late Americans
Brandon Taylor

RIVERHEAD, OUT NOW

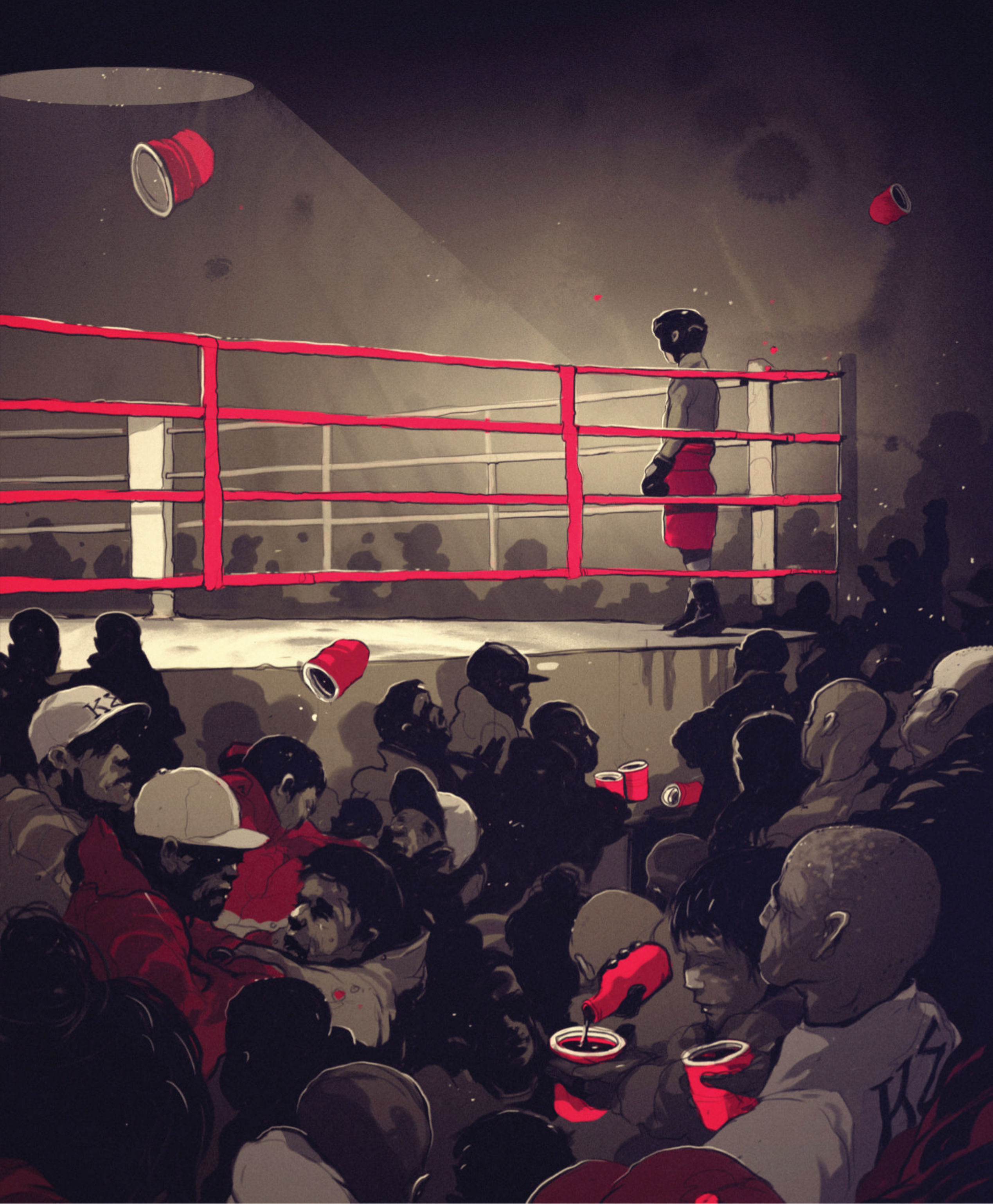
One of the best contemporary writers on young queer creatives, Taylor continues the theme with this offering about a group of Iowa City friends who work as dancers and poets, and in amateur porn. Over a year of creative and personal revolution, they go through partnerships, daddy issues, and complicated friendships — all simultaneously chaotic, messy, and loving. **K.C.**

Nathan Valencia collapsed in the ring after a UNLV fraternity-sponsored boxing match – and never woke up. Now, a shattered community is looking for answers

BY ZOË BERNARD

ILLUSTRATION BY SIMON PRADES

DEATH AT A FRAT-BOY FIGHT NIGHT



THE EVENING OF THE FIGHT, NATHAN VALENCIA WAS NERVOUS.

It was the first time that Valencia, a member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas had participated in Fight Night, the annual event hosted by rival fraternity Kappa Sigma. Like other frat functions, Fight Night was for charity. But this particular event had a dangerous reputation, known for landing participants in the ER with broken noses and concussions.

This hadn't deterred Valencia, a charming and popular junior, from signing up. He'd been assigned to the card's main event, fighting Emmanuel Aleman, a fellow student and member of Kappa Sigma.

When Valencia and his girlfriend, Lacey Foster, pulled up to the Sahara Events Center – a dank-smelling roller-hockey rink just a mile off the Strip, wedged between a swingers club, a bathhouse, and several abandoned storefronts – something immediately felt off. Valencia and Foster entered to find the boxing ring stuck into one corner, surrounded by a hundred or so folding chairs. The scene had the look and feel of a legitimate boxing event – gloves, mouth guards, ring girls in short-shorts holding up cards to announce the rounds. But it was haphazard, too: a pile of trash in a corner of the venue, the dingy warm-up room cluttered with old hockey gear. "We were like, 'What the heck is going on?' " Foster says.

There were nine fights that night. In each one, the opponents boxed three rounds of three minutes each, or until they appeared unable to fight back. They wore headgear, mouth guards, and gloves. Most fighters had a fraternity brother or close friend in their corner to provide pep talks and coaching.

Despite this adherence to basic boxing protocol, people in attendance would later describe the event as "chaotic" and "disorganized." In one of the early matches that night, a fighter's headgear came loose. When someone in the crowd screamed to stop the fight, the referee – who'd been seen drinking a beer – seemingly ignored it. There was an uneasy tension in the air. By the time Valencia was up, it was nearly 10 p.m., and the crowd, which had been drinking at the venue's bar, had teetered from tipsy to drunk.

"Nathan Valenciaaaa," the emcee roared into the mic as the audience cheered. Valencia, stone sober, appeared serious and apprehensive as he made his way across the room. Shirtless, in red headgear and black shorts, he shrugged off an oversize purple fraternity jacket and climbed into the ring.

For a few uncomfortably long moments, Valencia paced alone in the ring as 2Pac's "Ambitionz Az a Fighta" boomed over the sound system. Then, the emcee called the name of his opponent. As Emmanuel Aleman entered – lean and muscular, in white shorts, with a purposeful, confident stride – he tapped Valencia's glove with his own. The two shadowboxed in their corners before the fight began.

In a video of the match, it's clear they're both amateurs. As the fight began, they lunged at each other fist-first, swatting and punching, slapping gloves down on each other's heads, and rarely connecting a straight shot. They hit each other in the face and body, but also areas like the leg, which is out of bounds in boxing matches at any level.

The ref largely held back, though he halted the fight momentarily to tell Valencia to stop hitting the back of Aleman's neck. Both fighters appeared coherent, if out of their element. By the end of the first round, Valencia had grown slightly winded, but was still fighting – clubbing the top of Aleman's head, knocking his ill-fitting headgear to one side.

As the rounds continued, the fight grew more erratic. The two threw random blows, their movements sloppy and imprecise, the frenzied strokes of a parking-lot brawl. And then Aleman had Valencia cornered, landing punch after punch into his head until Valencia broke free and sprinted across the ring. As Valencia ran, dodging Aleman's blows, he looked exhausted. By the time the referee called the fight at the end of the final round, Valencia could barely stand. Aleman gave Valencia a quick hug, then Valencia leaned over the ropes, struggling to hold himself up.

Foster stepped up to see how he was doing. "I've never seen someone so tired," she says. She climbed in beside him, patting his back, telling him he did a good job. But by then, "he was staring past me," she says. "It looked like his consciousness was disappearing."

Aleman never saw it coming. "He was fine the whole fight," he says. "At the end, he sat down. When he couldn't get up, I thought he was tired."

The crowd was growing rowdy. In the audience, a brawl broke out and spectators shouted and pushed against each other. In the ring, Valencia suddenly collapsed. People climbed into the ring beside Foster as Valencia lay beside her, barely breathing. A panic-stricken woman, who authorities would later say claimed to be a nurse, attempted to give Valencia water. Then, according to one witness, she dragged his inert body across the ring by his ankles, in an attempt to move him away from the crush of bystanders clamoring into the ring.

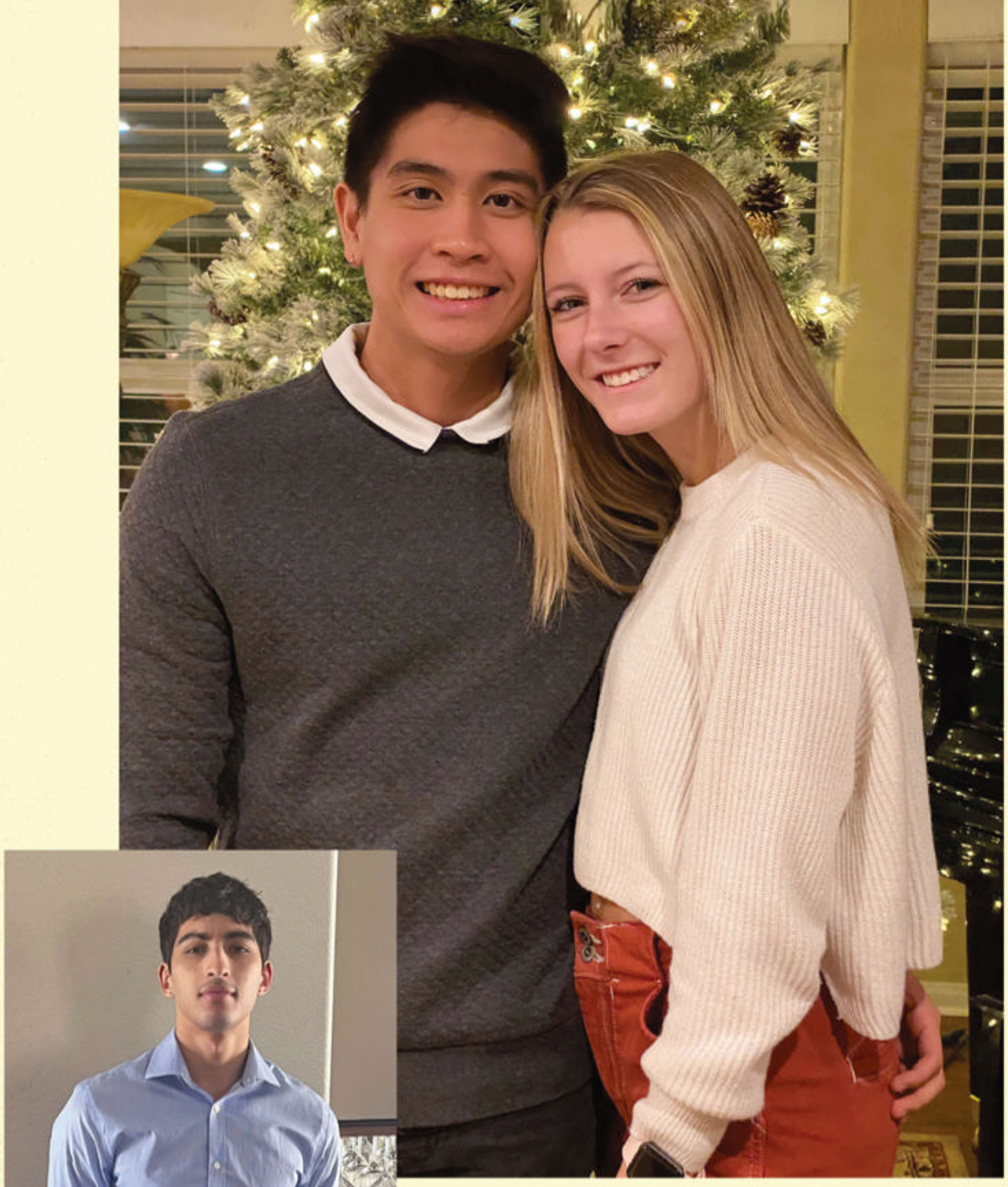
An attendee called 911. "We have nurses here but we need, like, real medical assistance," she begged. When EMTs arrived eight minutes later, they classified Valencia a "Gus Trauma" – the medical equivalent to "John Doe" – because the people attending to him, including the frat's medical personnel, were so intoxicated they couldn't "coherently articulate his name," according to interviews cited in the subsequent attorney general's report. Valencia was rushed to the hospital, where he spent three days in a coma. On Nov. 23, 2021, at 2:46 p.m., he was pronounced dead.

Later, in the days that followed, a news story detailing the evening's proceedings would describe Fight Night as a "diabolical underground fight club." In reality, there was nothing underground about Fight Night, which existed with both full knowledge of its sponsoring fraternity and UNLV. Similar events take place at dozens of colleges and universities across the United States each year, pitting members of fraternities and sororities against one another in what is supposed to be a show of charity and collegiate camaraderie. This event was anything but. According to the attorney general's report, dozens of interviews, and a lawsuit filed by Valencia's parents, Kappa Sigma's Las Vegas Fight Night was an unregulated and dangerous event. It was only a matter of time before someone was going to die.

FRATERNITY BOXING matches date back more than a century. Though Kappa Sigma's Fight Night was introduced in Alabama in 1994, as a way for fraternities to contribute to philanthropic causes, it was first held at UNLV in 2011, and has emerged as one of the biggest Greek events affiliated with the university. In its second year, boxer Floyd Mayweather donated nearly $50,000 to a Fight Night charity cause after hearing about it. While only about 100 people showed up to watch the 2021 matches, countless others watched online. "If you're not participating, then you're watching, and if you're not watching there, then you're watching on someone's Instagram Live," says Makamae Aquino, a former member of the Zeta Tau Alpha sorority who fought in 2019.

According to multiple UNLV students, the event has a reputation of being dangerous – which, for many participants, is a part of its appeal. "If someone signs up with an expectation that nothing will happen, and that no blood will be shed, they are ob-

Freelancer ZOË BERNARD *wrote about crypto devotees at Miami's Bitcoin conference in 2021.*



COLLISION COURSE

Nathan Valencia (above) with his girlfriend, Lacey Foster. His boxing match with Emmanuel Aleman (left) at the annual frat event Fight Night ended in his death. Foster had begged him not to participate. "No, I have to," he said.

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE VALENCIA FAMILY; COURTESY OF EMMANUEL ALEMAN

viously mistaken," says Manny Tapia, who fought in three Fight Nights. "It's bound to happen."

Many of the students who participate have never boxed before – the flyers posted around campus stated "no experience required" – meaning they don't understand "the full context of what [they're] signing up for," says Christian Paskevicius, a former member of Sigma Alpha Mu who fought in two Fight Nights. "[Kappa Sigma] expects that people who don't know what they're doing could potentially hurt people less." Instead, this lack of experience often leads to serious injuries meted out by amateur fighters. (Kappa Sigma declined multiple interview requests and declined to comment on a detailed list of allegations.)

Boxing, of course, is dangerous by design – which is why it's one of the most heavily regulated sports in the country. There's a stark difference between pro boxing, where the goal is to make money and ideally knock out your opponent, and amateur boxing like UNLV's Fight Night, where the goal is to score points by landing and avoiding certain hits. According to the amateur rules, a fight should be stopped the moment a fighter exhibits bleeding, cuts, or swelling.

At least, that's how these fights are *supposed* to go. When the sport is properly supervised, it can be "one of the safest sports out there," says Mike McAtee, the executive director of USA Boxing, the national governing body of amateur boxing. But injuries – both superficial and otherwise – are a possibility for any fighter entering the ring. In addition to the likelihood that fighters will wake up the next morning feeling "punch-drunk" – the lingering aftereffects of a blow to the head that can feel like a particularly excruciating hangover – they run the risk of serious injury.

"You have two opponents mauling each other, and no one knows what the fuck they're doing."

Paskevicius recalls that following a 2014 match, his opponent was bent over the trash can "puking after the fight for the next hour." Later, after his opponent left to get medical attention, Paskevicius checked in to see if he was all right: "He said, 'Yeah, I just had some minor head trauma.' "

The danger comes when fighters – particularly inexperienced ones – don't follow the rules. And Fight Night's rookie participants regularly engage in dangerous techniques: Fighters have been known to hit each other in the back of the head, an illegal move due to its association with serious injury to the brain and spinal cord, which can lead to brain trauma, paralysis, and death. The 2021 Fight Night bouts were described by Edgar Soltero, an audience member who attended to support a friend, as "chaotic. A bunch of inexperienced fighters resorting to panic tactics. Turning around, doing a full 360, exposing the back of their heads."

Typically, the referee training required to oversee an amateur match "takes at least a year," McAtee says. Even then, the match can be stopped by not only the referee, but also three other people overseeing the match – the coach, the ringside doctor, and the referee judge. This is "built in for safety," he says. But not in this case. Kappa Sigma's Fight Night had none of these redundancies, according to the AG's report and the lawsuit filed by the Valencia family.

Because Fight Night referees rarely abide by the rules of sanctioned fighting events, matches often look more like what Soltero calls "a bunch of street kids" brawling than a boxing fight. Michael Herman, who fought in UNLV's 2019 Fight Night, says he kept seeing "kids getting hammer-fisted to the head. You have two opponents mauling each other, and no one knows what the fuck they're doing."

IN THE WEEKS before Fight Night, Nathan's mother, Cynthia Valencia, begged her son – her youngest child – to drop out. "You worry too much. Focus on the positive," she recalls him telling her. "This is for charity." His fight had also been made the main event, something that was an honor – and a source of anxiety.

The fact that he'd signed up in the first place had been a surprise. Valencia, 20, wasn't a student anyone had expected to participate in an event like this. In the past, he'd shown little interest in either martial arts or feuding with rival fraternities. His Sigma Alpha Epsilon brothers called him "a true gentleman." He'd drive any of them across town at a moment's notice, or hop on a late-night call to lend advice. He was also known to dote on Foster, his girlfriend of just under two years, a soft-spoken strawberry-blonde, who, like Valencia, studied kinesiology at UNLV. "The day I met him, I texted all my friends: 'Guys! I'm gonna marry this man,' " she says. She, too, asked him to change his mind about the fight. "You don't have to do this," she told him. She remembers him shaking his head and saying, "No, I have to."

Valencia had been training alongside another fraternity brother, Daniel Corona, at a local boxing gym, where he attended nine separate sessions over the course of a month, according to the AG's report. Those consisted of lifting [*Cont. on 76*]

The Champion Mariachi of Uvalde High School

By Julyssa Lopez

Photographs by José Ibarra Rizo

Led by one tireless teacher, a group of kids came together, mastered a traditional sound, and became the pride of a Texas town that had suffered unthinkable tragedy

UHS
UHS

Every weekday at 5:30 a.m., while most of his San Antonio, Texas, neighborhood is still asleep, Albert Martinez gets into his silver Nissan Sentra and starts the drive to Uvalde,

70 miles to the west. That early, U.S. 90, which starts near the Mexican border and ends in Florida, is infinitely dark and leaden, the tiny farms along the way covered in shadows.

Martinez is a 50-year-old music teacher in Uvalde. Usually, he drives in silence. The radio would be a distraction – it's almost impossible for him to listen to anything without counting in time or wondering why an instrument wasn't tuned more tightly. Instead, he makes plans, deciding which song his kids might learn next or planning upcoming performances. By the time he arrives in Uvalde, the sun has come up.

The rest of the city is starting the day, too: Cars move up and down Main Street, a short strip dotted with a leafy park, an H-E-B grocery store, and local restaurants where everyone runs into one another. There's an immigration checkpoint in town, but Uvalde isn't a border town, as it's often painted – it's more than 60 miles from Piedras Negras, Mexico. Still, many families, even those here for decades, have held on to their roots, contributing to a culture that's distinctly Mexican American. Uvalde's identity is best understood by longtime residents, who agree that this is a small, quiet community – 15,000 people in all – bonded by time, proximity, and routine. "Everybody knows a relative of everyone," one local tells me. "It's like we're all connected somehow."

Martinez soon reaches Uvalde High School, parks in a back lot, and makes his way inside before the first bell rings at 7:50 a.m. But a few blocks away, if you continue on Main Street, you reach the town square. Here, you're reminded of how the city's story shattered not long ago. A crystalline blue fountain sits at the center, surrounded by 21 white crosses. They're a symbol of infinite love and impossible agony – Uvalde's collective pain and its refusal to forget the lives lost on May 24, 2022, when a gunman opened fire at Robb Elementary School, killing 19 fourth-grade children and two teachers in one of the deadliest mass shootings in American history.

Families, friends, and strangers replenish each cross with an endless supply of handwritten cards, bouquets, and stuffed animals. Just before Easter, colorful plastic eggs and toy rabbits cover the site, a paschal season spent in sorrow. A troupe of artists flooded into town last summer and painted murals honoring each victim; today, an older woman stands in front of one of them and wipes away tears.

There are other tributes to the victims in town, but every loved one mourns individually, carrying their own trove of memories. "It's like we're just stuck on May 24th. It just does not change," says Berlinda Irene Arreola, the step-grandmother of Amerie Jo Garza, a 10-year-old girl who loved art and had a knack for sculpting tiny objects out of clay. In a place as small as Uvalde, the pain reverberates, sending aftershocks of trauma and sadness. "Nothing like this has ever happened before," says Gloria Cazares, who lost her daughter Jackie, a cheerful nine-year-old who dreamed about going to Paris one day. "The community – you just don't know how to deal with it."

Grief that great becomes amorphous, spreading out in unpredictable ways. In Uvalde, one outlet has been mariachi music, a sound embedded into the town's cultural DNA. Mariachi traditions run deep in Texas, a reminder of roots that predate U.S. borders. Some of mariachi's folk-driven rhythms date back to the 18th century, the style having bloomed across small ranches and farms along the western part of Mexico. Radio and movies popularized the look and feel of mariachi, which became known for bold trumpets, perfectly synced violins, five-string vihuelas, and bass-guitar-like guitarróns.

Over the past year, mariachi's traditions have served a solemn purpose in Uvalde. At funerals, mariachi musicians serenaded the inconsolable. Last June, more than 50 drove into Uvalde from all over Texas, hoping to offer strength and solidarity to people they'd never met. "Part of our calling is also to be there at the end of life," a musician named Anthony Medrano told ROLLING STONE at the time. "We are called on to console, to grieve, to send off the ones who have passed away." Mariachi can be the soundtrack to better times, too, more jubilant mariachi songs offering moments of joy at family gatherings and quinceañeras.

This is the music that tumbles out of Martinez's classroom. Since September 2021, he's been the mariachi director in Uvalde, working with JV and varsity classes – plus kids at Morales Junior High School – as they learn the art form. On the April afternoon I visit, his energy is on full display as he crisscrosses the band room, demonstrating parts on guitar, trumpet, and guitarrón. He modulates his gravelly voice like a musician, toggling from playful to stern. Usu-

Young Mariachi

[PREVIOUS PAGE]
Senior violin player Gael Fernandez. Under Martinez, he learned to take the music much more seriously.
[FACING PAGE]
Clockwise from top left: Jayro Del Valle, Amberly Escobar, Sarahy Escobar, and Patrick Mejia

Senior editor JULYSSA LOPEZ *wrote the Rauw Alejandro cover story last February.*

UHS

“It took a while [for the students] to get adjusted to Martinez,” senior violin player Gael Fernandez remembers, “because we were like, ‘Now we actually have to do work.’ ”

ally it stays affectionate, especially when he refers to each kid as “mijo” or “mija.”

When Martinez started at Uvalde High, a lot of his students didn’t take the music seriously. Within two years, they’d become the pride of Uvalde, during a wrenching time.

Right now, though, they’re a bunch of distracted teenagers late for sixth period.

“All right,” Martinez says, snapping them to attention. “What do you guys wanna practice?”

MARTINEZ NEVER PLANNED to teach mariachi. He was born in Toa Baja, in Puerto Rico, and moved to El Paso, Texas, at age five. He comes from a musical family, and around age 10, Martinez picked up the trumpet. Though he played in jazz and marching bands growing up, his dream was to share stages with salsa and merengue stars from his home island. “I’m Puerto Rican, so I thought to myself, ‘I’m going to play [with] Bonny Cepeda and Elvis Crespo,’ ” he says. “I couldn’t wait.”

Until he took a mariachi class his senior year of high school, his view of the music reflected the stereotypes held by many Americans unfamiliar with the tradition: costumed groups who play at kitschy Mexican restaurants. He realized just how talented these musicians were when his teacher took the class to a mariachi festival in Arizona, where he saw bands like Mariachi los Camperos de Nati Cano, the first mariachi group to play at Carnegie Hall, and Mariachi Cobre (Martinez would later play several shows with them alongside Linda Ronstadt). He was struck by the power of their harmonies, their almost telepathic connection as they played as one.

Martinez got a degree in music education, then spent 19 years as a band director in El Paso. In 2021, when his wife, Ivonne, found a new teaching job in San Antonio that paid $10,000 more than the one she had, the couple decided to try a new city. Martinez began job hunting, too, but with the school year having already begun, openings were scarce.

A friend tipped him off that Uvalde was looking for a new mariachi director. Martinez didn’t know anything about that part of Texas; all he could think about was that the job matched his skill set, and he felt like he could endure that daily drive. He didn’t plan on being one of those teachers who only sticks around for a year, either. “I think every kid deserves a good teacher,” he remembers telling the principal. He could do it.

Or so he thought. When he started in September 2021, it was already a month into the school year. The first day he walked into his varsity class at Uvalde High, he found a group of irritated, bored-looking teenagers barely looking up from their phones. None of them were holding instruments; some were sprawled on the ground, laughing over him. When he tried to start a lesson, the energy went from apathetic to hostile. “They’d be like, ‘Screw you, we don’t have to listen to you.’ ” Martinez says. “They hated me. I’m talking months of kids telling me, ‘We’re not doing it. You’re not going to make us.’ ”

One of the most brazen agitators was Gael Fernandez, a violin player with shoulder-length black hair. He’s funny and gregarious, qualities that got him in trouble when he’d distract and derail the class. Before he met “Mr. Martinez,” he didn’t take mariachi all that seriously, even though, like most students in the class, he’d been playing it since junior high. The program has been at the high school for almost 25 years, but Fernandez says mariachi class had always been laid-back. On an average day, students might learn some fundamentals and play a song or two, but then the rest of the class functioned like a free period.

The semester had started without a regular mariachi teacher – just a string of substitutes cycling in and out until Martinez arrived. “I don’t even remember if they let us get our instruments,” Fernandez says of the subs. “I think that’s why it took a while to get adjusted to Martinez, because we were like, ‘Now we have to actually do work.’ ”

Martinez wanted the kids to actually *try,* to see what they could do if they put their minds to it, to see if maybe, just maybe, they could fall in love with mariachi the way he had. Also, he was stubborn. So rather than quit or punish his class, he did something either bold or foolish, depending on your viewpoint: He registered Uvalde High School in Texas’ biggest mariachi competition.

In the early 2000s, schools began asking the University Interscholastic League (UIL) to add mariachi to its roster of academic, athletic, and music contests, putting the activity on the same level as sanctioned sports like swimming and football. It made sense: Mariachi combines elements of band, choir, and orchestra, and the art form had been growing in popularity in south Texas. For many students, mariachi is a way of staying close to their heritage. UIL added it as a regional contest in 2007, and in 2019, it formally expanded into a state festival.

The Newcomer
Sophomore Arianna Ovalle is an intensely focused violinist who joined the group last year.

Slowly, Martinez made progress. The kids would rehearse slightly out-of-tune songs, grumbling on the side. But the competition gave them something to work toward. It wasn’t until they walked into a giant auditorium at Southwest High School in San Antonio in February 2022 that they fully understood what they’d gotten into. There were schools like McAllen ISD and Roma ISD, with much bigger mariachi teams in crisp, perfectly coordinated charro outfits, practicing choreographed stomps and sombrero flourishes. Some groups had harp players, others had multiple instructors dedicated to each section of the band. “And there I was, running around with my backpack,” Martinez says with a chuckle.

Although the kids aren’t competing head-to-head, they’re still subject to high standards. The schools that advance from the regional round make it to the state showcase, where they’re judged on a scale of one to five (one being the top rating) on tone, technique, and musicianship. “To get a superior rating and come home with the big trophy is extremely difficult,” says Joseph Baca, a teacher from Florida who judged this year’s festival. “It’s going to be even more difficult for the smaller schools – usually they’re missing a budget, they don’t have a big pool of students, and you have to work with who you have.”

Uvalde took its turn onstage and ended up with a middling 2-2-3 rating. “It wasn’t our best performance,” Fernandez says sheepishly. But though the experience had been intimidating, the kids came back energized, eager to see what they could push themselves to do.

Martinez used the momentum to keep building out the team. Earlier in the year, some students had told him about David Hernandez, a charismatic kid who played trumpet in the jazz and marching bands and ran his family’s fireworks stand every summer. He towers over most kids – everyone calls him Tree because, as one of his classmates put it, “he’s been, like, six foot since fifth grade.” Martinez persuaded him to help out the team before the regional competition – and, eventually, to join the class.

That spring, Martinez announced he’d be initiating an audition process, allowing more freshmen and sophomores to try out for varsity. He recruited a couple of younger students, like a soft-spoken violin player named Arianna Ovalle. She was a little less experienced but determined and intensely focused; in fact, she wasn’t sure about doing varsity mariachi because she didn’t want it to affect her volleyball commitments.

Martinez also got tough when he had to: “Do me a favor,” he told Fernandez. “Don’t sign up if you’re not going to take this seriously.” The warning rattled Fernandez, who vowed to work harder and prioritize practice.

As the term ground to a close in May 2022, the next school year looked promising for Uvalde’s varsity mariachi students. Martinez even offered private lessons to students who wanted to get a head start.

Then, on May 24, two days before the end of the school year, sirens filled Main Street, audible from nearly every corner in town. From that point on, nothing in Uvalde would be the same.

IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING the shooting, Gloria Cazares was struck by the support she felt in Uvalde. “It was heartwarming,” she says. “We had food trains, leaving their cards, leaving baskets, food. It was overwhelming.”

But as time passed, the sense of unity and support began to fade. Grief-stricken parents fought for answers and expressed outrage over law enforcement’s response, particularly after investigations revealed

that nearly 400 officers waited 77 minutes to confront the gunman, who'd barricaded himself in two adjoining classrooms. Parents demanded accountability and called for gun reforms, topics that divided Uvalde. Cazares and other mothers banded together, forming an organization called Lives Robbed to fight for gun-control legislation alongside other families. The work they did was grueling, but Cazares found strength in the other moms, leaning on them to get through each day. (In May of this year, they had a huge win when House Bill 2744, which would raise the age to buy assault-rifle-style weapons from 18 to 21, passed a Texas House committee during an unexpected vote.)

With the weight of the tragedy and constant media attention hovering over everyone, the new school year began in September, three weeks late. Reporters chased down Uvalde High students, curious to know if they had connections to the tragedy. The question seemed futile in a place as small as Uvalde. Though no one understood the pain like the parents of the children who were lost, you could find cousins, neighbors, and extended relatives of the victims at any turn. Much of the community had attended Robb Elementary. *It's like we're all connected somehow.*

Meanwhile, in Martinez's classroom, the students grew closer. In previous years, all the mariachi classes were mixed together, depending on what openings kids had in their schedules. But now, after Martinez had worked with school counselors to make sure all the varsity mariachi musicians were in the same class period, they met and rehearsed at 1:50 p.m. each day. Some had been in the same classes since kindergarten, but they hadn't really been friends. Now, they saw one another all the time. "We all got to know each other. We felt more comfortable to help each other out," says Sarahy Escobar, a shy senior who plays violin. "It felt like we were all on the same page," adds Ovalle.

Martinez likes to let the kids guide one another. Tree emerged as the leader of the trumpets, a section that also included Escobar's younger sister, Amberly, and Mayumi and Nicte Montiel Roman, chatty twins born in Aguascalientes, Mexico. Patrick Mejia, a quiet senior with perpetually ruffled curls, had switched from guitar to vihuela, a lute-like instrument that gives mariachi music its distinctive pitch, and juggled track and football practice while never missing a rehearsal.

In the string section, Fernandez would help younger players like Ovalle figure out complex arrangements in his affable way, though Martinez sometimes had to make sure Fernandez stayed on task. Some of the kids joked about Escobar being like the mom of the group: On performance days, she would flutter from kid to kid, fixing their maroon mariachi *trajes,* straightening their wide-brimmed white hats and adjusting hair ribbons.

Meanwhile, Martinez worked with two mariachi friends to find the right competition music. There's an art to this. Every school that competes at UIL has to play a *son jalisciense,* a traditional style that reflects the roots of mariachi, and a contrasting song or medley. Martinez decided to try "El Son de Irapuato," a cheerful but lesser-known *son* from central Mexico, and "Quien Sera," a popular mariachi cover of "Sway," best known from Michael Bublé's rendition. He felt confident that the rhythm section could handle each one, that the violins and the trumpets were strong enough to hold everything together.

Their weakness, he knew, was singing, a result of working with kids who were still a little reluctant to be onstage. But Escobar had a pretty voice, honed by singing at family parties, so he had her lead "Quien Sera" alongside her sister and another sophomore, named Kamila Martinez.

The team perfected their competition songs, learning them inside and out, and came into regionals in February much more confident than they'd been the year before. Still, the students were shocked when they learned they'd tallied enough points to move on to the state festival. "It didn't really settle in that we were actually going," says Lizett Vasquez, a junior who plays the guitarrón and tends to get a little nervous before big events.

The Teacher
Albert Martinez played in major mariachi bands before coming to work at Uvalde.

On a Friday morning at the end of February, the team piled onto a bus to make the two-hour ride to Seguin, Texas, for the state competition. Uvalde was one of the first schools to perform that afternoon. Almost all the kids' parents sat in the audience. Back at school, some teachers put the UIL livestream on in their classes so the rest of the school could watch.

Before playing for the judges, every school warms up in a small side room. The nerves started building up there. "Before then, it was like, 'Oh, yeah, we're going to state,'" says Vasquez. "Now it's like, 'Wow, we're really here.' It doesn't feel real."

Lined up in the hallway before going onstage, they were ready – their hats at the same level, following each other in a straight, trusting line. "I was just standing there and thinking, 'The months of preparation we put in, everything we've done, is going to get judged in a less-than-10-minute segment,'" Fernandez says. Martinez barely remembers this part; he was running around, adjusting mics and pulling up music stands. But the kids smiled like they'd practiced and Vasquez let out an elated *grito,* the triumphant yelp common in mariachi music, kicking off "El Son de Irapuato."

Everything was going well until "Quien Sera." The three girls walked to the front of the stage –

The Varsity [FROM LEFT] Albert Martinez, Sofia Schaffino, Nicte Roman, David Hernandez, Victoria Reyes, Sarahy Escobar, Kamila Martinez, Amberly Escobar, Lizett Vasquez, Patrick Mejia, Gracie Flores, Sophia Rodriguez, Gael Fernandez, Tommie Guerrero, Arianna Ovalle, Nicolas Avila, Miranda Carreon, Mayumi Roman, Jayro Del Valle, Joaquin Hernandez

Ovalle is careful about boasting, but knows the win meant something to the community. "We made them proud, I guess," she says.

they seemed a little shaky – and began to sing. Right when the first chorus hit, something slipped: They stumbled ever so slightly, falling out of time with the rhythm section. Standing in front of them, Martinez fought off a twinge of panic and started mouthing the words along with them. The girls recovered just in time for the next chorus. "The second time, they nailed it," Martinez says. "They sounded really, really good." By the end of the song, their voices rang out through the auditorium, confident and powerful.

All of it – the courage it took to get there, the uncertainty, the applause afterward – seemed to briefly overwhelm the kids. Many of them were crying before they stepped offstage, unsure of their performance. But in the audience, people began welling up, too, for a different reason: They were touched by what they'd witnessed.

To Baca, one of the festival judges, Uvalde's performance wasn't technically perfect – few things by teenagers are – but what moved him was how well Uvalde played as a group. "They were communicating how they needed to communicate. That's the most difficult [thing]," he says. "A mariachi ensemble can fall apart quite easily, given the complex rhythms and how things kind of float over each other." But he could tell the Uvalde kids were connected.

Bradley Kent, the music director of UIL, saw many performances that day, but says Uvalde stood out. "I got to tell you, it was emotional for all of us. There were a few tears shed among our staff as well," he says. "When we hear special performances like theirs, it just speaks to your heart."

The UIL awards ceremony would be held late that evening, but the kids had to head back to Uvalde. Before they could go, the festival staff stopped them. They pulled them into a hallway and, before some of them could even process what was happening, brought out a giant state trophy. The team had earned a "1" rating overall, the highest distinction possible. Someone got a picture just as the trophy came out; you can see several kids covering their mouths in pure shock. A few burst into tears.

Martinez had his own moment right then, his year and a half at the school flashing in front of his eyes. He thought about all the time they'd spent in the classroom, all the practice it took. "I was proud," he says, "to see that full circle, from them not being successful to the moment they were finally able to grasp what I knew they could achieve."

They got on the bus and made the two-hour trek back to Uvalde. Fernandez fell asleep on the way, clutching the trophy in his arms.

AFTER THEIR WIN at state, the kids were welcomed back to Uvalde like heroes. The community is still reeling from the tragedy – and nothing will bring back such deep losses – but many in [*Cont. on 77*]

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Reviews

Music

ARLO PARKS' VULNERABLE ECSTASY

A soulful pop prodigy lets us into her world on her excellent second album

By MAURA JOHNSTON

Arlo Parks
My Soft Machine
TRANSGRESSIVE

ON FIRST LISTEN, the second album from London singer-songwriter Arlo Parks sounds like something to luxuriate in; Parks sings and lays down poetry over plush textures and simmering beats. But a closer listen reveals that these pillowy structures are, in fact, cushions against the blows of modern life – bulwarks that keep Parks' self, the "soft machine" referenced in the album title, moving without cutting herself off or suffering too much long-term damage.

Parks is a pop prodigy; she got noticed by a management company as a teen, and won the 2021 Mercury Prize with her debut album, *Collapsed in Sunbeams,* which came out when she was months away from turning 21. →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Mercedes deBellard

MERCEDES DEBELLARD, COURTESY OF FOLIO ART

ARLO PARKS

That album's blend of bedroom-pop sensibilities and intricately detailed lyrics felt very in tune with the homespun vibes of the early pandemic, even as the experiences described by Parks' supple, soothing voice possessed a depth that indicated boundless curiosity.

My Soft Machine expands that sonic palette while also digging in deeper emotionally – even when Parks is describing the ways in which she tries to numb-out. "I wish I was bruiseless," she murmurs on the album's dreamy opener, ruing her own lost innocence while regretting her powerlessness against shielding others from malevolent forces, including all the complex, not-always-positive feelings tied up in the word "love."

Parks has a skill for inviting listeners not only into her mind, but also into her immediate environment, and the effects bring her racing emotions right to the forefront. The gently groove-forward "Blades" places Parks' longing for an ex-intimate amid a party outfitted with totems of the good life – Diptyque scents, tequila cocktails – that only make the "regret … flowering inside me while I'm scooping ice" hit harder. "Purple Phase" is a rain-slicked chronicle of seeing a friend in crisis, Parks' asides about the possibility of her depressed companion getting better – "I just want to see her iridescent charming cats down from trees," she exclaims in a singsong voice – contrasting sharply with the images of her falling into depression.

That talent extends to Parks' cheerier moments, too. The grunge-soul love song "Devotion" explodes into a chunky riff at its climax, its lyrical references to Deftones and Kim Deal becoming alive in its 2023 vision of the alt-rock era's poppiest peaks. "Impurities" is a sun-dappled love song where cascades of synth wash over a smoothly sauntering beat; Parks is fully enthralled with the idea of being seen as a full human: "I radiate like a star … when you embrace all my impurities," she trills on the chorus, secure enough in herself to be OK with any flaws her lover might have. "Don't hide the bruise, I know it's hard to be alive sometimes."

It's the sound of an artist figuring out her place in the world, one where she can feel pure joy while bracing herself and her loved ones against its slings and arrows. Ⓡ

JASON ISBELL HITS A NEW PEAK

The Americana icon offers hard truths and deep healing on his ninth album By WILL HERMES

IN HBO'S Jason Isbell documentary, he and fellow singer-songwriter Amanda Shires seem to court marital disaster debating the best word for a lyric (spoiler: their union survives). Writing is high stakes for Isbell. "If I was makin' people dance, I wouldn't sit there and waste my time," he says, laughing cautiously. "But they are not out there dancin' – I gotta get those prepositions right."

Jason Isbell
Weathervanes
SOUTHEASTERN

He does on *Weathervanes,* his brutally beautiful ninth studio album. Its songs tremble with anger, desperation, and fear; characters wrestle regret and unhealthy appetites, struggling to cut losses in the wake of bad choices and cascading consequences. Isbell's stories glint with memoir and headlines as they put human faces on head-count epidemics: mass shootings, opioid addiction, the coronavirus. Even the love songs are bruised and weary, chilled by cold truth. Inextricable from all this is the 400 Unit, as essential here as Crazy Horse or the Heartbreakers to Neil Young's or Tom Petty's great moments. As a group document, Shires and her fiddle included, it's Isbell's strongest album to date.

What's crazy is how, in these grim times, this is effectively feel-good music. In "Death Wish," the seductive slow-burn single about a hellbent partner, Isbell observes, "It takes a whole lotta medicine to feel like a little kid." Have the snares and lures of addiction – a topic Isbell knows well – ever been nailed so precisely? The balancing act between light and dark continues on "King of Oklahoma," where a hard-scrabble dude with a habit to feed plans a scrap-metal heist and a prescription forgery after treatment for an apparent workplace injury leaves him with little more than "a pocket full of pills." The pretty "Cast Iron Skillet" builds its chilling narrative in forensic snapshots: flowers on a grave, a brutal stabbing, a boyfriend "with smiling eyes and dark skin," an "old man at the Quickstop/Lying to the county cops."

Isbell has an activist streak – he was quick to call Morgan Wallen on his racially insensitive bullshit – and in song, Isbell does didactic well. His 2017 "White Man's World" deserves a place in Florida's high school curriculum (shout-out to Ron DeSantis). Ditto *Weathervanes*' "Save the World," which addresses school shootings via collateral trauma. But the strongest songs here have the fewest answers. "Miles" shows how family dysfunction happens with the best of intentions, as the 400 Unit flash their classic-rock bona fides, with the guitars echoing both latter-day Beatles and Neil Young's tender murder ballad "Down by the River." The nostalgic prettiness might strike some as a Band-Aid on a bullet hole. But you learn to take your healing where you can get it. Ⓡ

FROM TOP: DANNY CLINCH; LAWRENCE AGYEI

BREAKING

Kara Jackson's Essential Folk Therapy

CHICAGO-AREA singer-songwriter Kara Jackson is a former National Youth Poet Laureate who blends country folk and Seventies chamber pop on her adventurous full-length debut, *Why Does the Earth Give Us People to Love?* Jackson's writing is both immaculately crafted (listen to the way she plays with elongated syllables and repetition at the end of "dickhead blues") and deeply funny: "Every man thinks I'm his fucking mother," she sings seconds later, on "therapy." With its series of five-minute-plus songs, Jackson's LP is the most daring singer-songwriter statement you'll hear this year. **JONATHAN BERNSTEIN**

NIALL HORAN ELEVATES HIS GAME

One Direction's Irish bard hits a sensitive peak on third LP

By ROB SHEFFIELD

ONE DIRECTION'S Irish bard has always been the soul of warmth and charm, always ready to bust out his acoustic guitar and make a stadium feel like a rowdy pub. But Niall Horan elevates his game with *The Show,* his third and finest album yet. The last time he dropped an album, *Heartbreak Weather,* it was just in time to see the world shut down for the pandemic. So he had to turn elsewhere for inspiration: inside.

The Show
Niall Horan
CAPITOL

He gets emotional on *The Show,* as he heads into his thirties. He wrote many of these tunes on piano, since his beloved guitars were stuck in tour storage – an especially cruel fate for this guy. It's full of laid-back ballads, heavy on the mellow, full of feelings about a time of personal turmoil. As he confesses in "Must Be Love," "I'm a specialist at overthinkin' everything."

For the most jovial bro in One Direction, the one with the widest smile and the biggest warmhearted enthusiasm for the band, it's touching to hear him get so intimate on his own. "Meltdown" is the most winning moment, an Eighties New Wave trip with Strokes-style drums and early Depeche Mode synths, as Horan promises, "When it all melts down, I'll be there." He brings empathy to power ballads like "Heaven," addressing twentysomething turmoil, while "Science" reaches out to someone struggling with depression, letting them know they're not alone. But the emotional highlight is the wonderfully titled love song "You Could Start a Cult," just Horan and his acoustic guitar, as he vows, "I'll follow you till there's no tomorrow." On *The Show,* he sounds like he knows exactly where he's going.

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ESSAY

Are Queer Stories Boxed in on TV?

After strides in the 2010s, LGBTQ representation has stalled. Here's why television needs to break out of the rut

By EMILY ST. JAMES

IN A PIVOTAL SCENE in the Disney+ Star Wars series *Andor*, two lovers reconnect in a bar. Cinta has taken a job in said bar to monitor the home of the woman who raised Cassian Andor, the resistance fighter of the series' title. He's currently in jail, but Cinta doesn't know that. She's dedicated to the Rebellion and willing to wait as long as it takes.

Then, her girlfriend, Vel, arrives. The portrayal of Vel and Cinta's relationship in earlier episodes has given the audience a sense of how comfortable the two are with each other. The love between them is deep and old. Vel tries to persuade Cinta to leave her post behind and go somewhere the two can be together. Cinta resists. For her, the struggle to topple the Empire will always come first. Yes, she loves Vel, and she likely always will. But there's a war to be won, and until it is, the pair will never be free to simply live their lives.

Vel and Cinta were my favorite queer characters introduced in the 2022-23 TV season, even though they were relatively minor in the full sweep of what *Andor* was trying to accomplish. Their central choice between continuing the fight or going off to live a quiet life together stands in not just for the conversations so many queer Americans I know are having right now, but also for the twin approaches TV has to telling queer stories.

For the most part, American TV rarely tells queer stories that don't break out of two very specific boxes. The first stretches back to the spate of gay supporting characters tossed into seemingly every late-Nineties sitcom, like Carter on *Spin City,* or Stanford on *Sex and the City*. That is, among an ensemble cast of characters, there are one or two who are queer, usually gay or lesbian characters who are often in committed relationships that largely occur offscreen, or bisexual characters whose sexuality might come up in a storyline or two, but who usually end up in a heterosexual relationship when all is said and done. Think Jacob on *Abbott Elementary* for the former, or Keeley on *Ted Lasso* for the latter.

The stories on these shows take efforts to make the characters' queerness part of the world of the show but rarely center it. There is immense value in this, to be clear. That *Abbott*, one of the most popular shows on TV right now, has a gay character in a committed, interracial relationship with another man normalizes queer identities for viewers who might not know many queer people in their lives. At the same time, Jacob is a relatively safe portrayal of homosexual love. You could drop his relationship into a show from 15 years ago without breaking a sweat.

The second approach to telling queer stories on American TV stems from shows popular in the mid-2010s, notably the Prime Video series *Transparent*. These stories tend to place queer characters at their center in some fashion, and they are often about the day-to-day lives of queerness. They're also usually lower-budget half-hour series that take a more contemplative look at life. They're often among the best on TV, yet they're very much aimed at a niche audience; low-conflict contemplation has never sent ratings soaring.

Increasingly, these shows also tend to be imports. The HBO Max series *Sort Of*, out of Canada, offers one of the few times TV has attempted to center nonbinary characters in an ongoing series. Similarly, the Netflix series *Heartstopper* (about teen boys falling for each other) and *Feel Good* (about a budding queer romance and one character gradually coming out as nonbinary) both have their roots in the U.K. Good TV can come from anywhere, and deep-pocketed American companies like Netflix can make sure these shows continue to get made. It's always been difficult to make shows like this in the American TV industry, but some data suggests that in the 2020s, that difficulty has only grown.

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT ONSCREEN Clockwise from top: *Yellowjackets'* Van and Tai, Uncle Clifford of *P-Valley,* Ellie and Riley Abel from *The Last of Us, Andor*'s Vel and Cinta, Jacob from *Abbott Elementary,* and Sabi from *Sort Of*.

PHOTOGRAPHS USED IN ILLUSTRATION: FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: JASPER SAVAGE/HBO; KAILEY SCHWERMAN/SHOWTIME; CURTIS BAKER/STARZ; GILLES MINGASSON/ABC; LIANE HENTSCHER/HBO; 2022 LUCASFILM LTD

ILLUSTRATION BY **Natasha Cunningham**

GLAAD's annual survey of LGBTQ representation on television found a dispiriting stagnance in the 2022-23 TV season, which ran from June 1, 2022, to May 31, 2023. In that time frame, TV featured 596 queer characters, compared with 637 in the 2021-22 season, a decline of 6.4 percent. Now, according to GLAAD's data, the 2021-22 TV season saw several historic highs for queer representation on TV, with nearly 12 percent of all characters on scripted broadcast prime-time TV being LGBTQ and the number of queer characters on scripted cable increasing by 20 percent. So perhaps a mild downturn was inevitable. Plus, measuring representation solely by numbers ignores that one show offering rich, textured stories about the queer experience is worth a dozen that have token queer characters.

Still, that slight downturn underscores a very real fear many LGBTQ people have that studios might scale back the stories they tell about us in response to a political environment that seems to turn a little more queerphobic by the day. Queer people will never disappear from television entirely, yet it's not hard to imagine entertainment companies, which have so often shied away from political controversy, easing up on the number of queer stories told or continuing to relegate us to supporting roles. When so much acceptance of queer identities in the U.S. has been tied to film and television normalizing our lives for the masses, a world where we are once again reduced to window dressing on-screen would be a disappointing one indeed.

That's why it's so frustrating to see so many queer characters still stuck in the same boxes TV has relegated us to for so long. In spite of that, though, there are promising signs, especially in prestige dramas. Vel and Cinta might have been supporting players in *Andor*, but their storyline tapped into the arguments many queer couples are having as our identities become ever more politicized. The doomed love story between teenagers Tai and Van on *Yellowjackets* explores the ways trauma can intersect with queer romance, and on *The Last of Us*, the story of fellow traumatized teen Ellie offers a surprisingly grounded look at growing up queer in the fungal apocalypse.

Uncle Clifford on Starz's terrific *P-Valley* provides a look not just at a life lived well outside traditional gender roles, but also at how the character's Blackness intersects with her gender identity. And over on the Hallmark Channel – the Hallmark Channel! – the soapy series *Ride* isn't just featuring a gay rodeo cowboy but forthrightly exploring what it means to be gay in that environment.

There's good stuff happening on kids TV, too. On *Muppet Babies*, no less a luminary than Gonzo gave kids a space to consider gender expression when putting on a dress to become Gonzo-rella, while the new Marvel series *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* features trans characters in its regular supporting cast. And almost no show on TV was more ambitious in portraying queer identities than the (sadly canceled) animated kids series *The Owl House*, which put a relationship between two girls front and center and celebrated so many different forms of queerness.

These signs are all promising ones. Perhaps the minor decrease GLAAD noted was just a brief pause before TV starts telling ever-bolder stories about queer people. Yes, any queer character on any show on TV helps to continue making America aware of our existence, but I want so much more than the boxes TV has sorted us into. Why is it still so rare to see stories about queer people of color and especially trans people of color? (Yes, *Pose* filled that void for a time, but it's no longer on the air.) Why, when TV shows trans people at all, does it still rely so heavily on trans women, instead of trans people from all across the gender spectrum? Why not more stories about working-class queer people? Or polyamorous queer people? Or older queer people?

To be queer, often, is to feel like something inside yourself doesn't match up with what society insists should be true. The process of learning to listen to that part of yourself can be an arduous one, but a medium like television can make that inner voice a little louder with every new queer story it tells. In the face of a terrifying political environment for LGBTQ people, here's hoping TV makes like Cinta and fights even harder. ®

QUEER TV GONE TOO SOON

These canceled shows did representation right.

The Owl House DISNEY
A winning kids show with a queer lead fighting monsters.

A League of Their Own PRIME VIDEO
The queer-friendly movie adaptation will end after Season Two.

Reboot HULU
A meta-comedy with a lesbian lead.

Yoo and Lee discover an old flame burns bright.

Movies

WHEN SPARKS FLY, TIME AFTER TIME

'Past Lives' reunites childhood crushes – and delivers a masterpiece about fate, love, and heartbreak By DAVID FEAR

Past Lives

STARRING	Greta Lee Teo Yoo John Magaro Moon Seung-ah Seung Min Yim
DIRECTED BY	Celine Song

'PAST LIVES,' writer-director Celine Song's debut feature, opens with a guessing game: Three people sit at a bar in the wee hours. We observe them from a distance. Two people off-frame are making up possible backstories. The two Koreans are tourists, one person says, and the white guy sitting to their left is their guide. No, the other replies, the lady and the white guy are a couple, and the Korean gent is their old friend. The camera creeps toward the woman in the trio – her name is Nora Moon – as the voices lob these alt-histories back and forth. Finally, she looks at us with a Mona Lisa smile. She knows the answer, but she's not telling. Not yet.

Maybe, in some alternate universe or ancient timeline, these three experienced all of the speculative scenarios. *Past Lives* is fixated on "in-yun," a Korean concept that suggests the same people weave in and out of one another's worlds over different centuries, different existences. This gently exhilarating, heartbreaking drama, told in three chapters, gives you the sense that so much of this has happened before, and will again; only the names and the outcomes change.

Once upon a time in Seoul, two kids – Na Young (Moon Seung-ah) and Hae Sung (Seung Min Yim) – were the best of friends. Na's family immigrates to Canada, alas, so whatever mutual childhood crush they harbored is cut short. Twelve years later, Na goes by the Westernized name Nora (Greta Lee) and lives in New York; Hae (*Decision to Leave's* Teo Yoo) is finishing up his mandatory military service back home. An impromptu social media message leads to a Skype relationship that keeps threatening to get deeper, more intense. There's a pitch-perfect, oft-kilter rhythm to all of this, plus the joy of watching two people slowly fall for each other a second time. Beware of that romantic glow, however – it's about to get complicated. The flirtation is too much for Nora, what with the distance and the distraction from her burgeoning writing career. Communication stops. Life goes on.

Magaro and Lee hold tight.

When *Past Lives* throws you into the last part of its triptych, another dozen years have passed and the stakes are higher. Nora is now a playwright, happily married to a writer (John Magaro) she met at a retreat. Then Hae makes good on a longtime promise to visit New York – for "vacation" – and Nora offers to play tour guide. Every sightseeing excursion and catch-up exchange feels loaded. The feelings haven't gone away.

Song isn't just flexing her chops as a dramatist here; she's said that the opening scene at the bar is straight out of real life. Yet even if she weren't pulling from her own experience, *Past Lives* feels achingly personal, tapping into the universal "what if." What if I'd taken that road, instead of this one? What if I'd said something instead of going silent? What if I'd gone back? What if I'd never left?

None of this comes across like chin stroking, because Song is too strong a writer to get didactic and her actors are too good at making this dilemma feel not just urgent but alive. Yoo lends a feeling of woundedness to his once and possible future suitor, and it's to both Magaro and the film's credit that his third-wheel spouse is neither saintly nor a villain.

But *Past Lives* is really Lee's movie, and she's the one who turns Nora's reconciliation with her past into something quietly monumental. Nora has no desire to leave. She also doesn't know what to do with this long-unrequited romance. As a supporting actor, Lee has stolen so many scenes the Screen Actors Guild should have her arrested. It isn't until now that you realize no one's given her a role that taps into her extraordinary range. She can do a lot simply by hinting at a smile or crinkling her eyes. The way she communicates Nora's wrestling with unfinished business makes most less-is-more acting feel like grandstanding.

In the end, it takes a lot to laugh, and an Uber to cry. *Past Lives* exits on one of the most devastating one-two punches ever to grace a tragedy, in the form of dual tracking shots interrupted by a telling flashback. What has happened or will happen to Nora and Hae in some other life is anyone's guess. This life is what they've got. And while fate seems to have dealt them their hand, it's also delivered something indelible to us: a movie that liberates your tears and makes you fall in love with it, predestined to be the best one you see this year. ®

A24, JIN YOUNG KIM/A24

[*Cont. from 42*] "I was like, 'I want to feel galactic today,' " she says. "A galactic gamer, because this is game night."

WHEN I COME back to the studio entrance the next afternoon, I mistake Janelle for a stuffed animal. Her back is to the sliding door, and her head is covered with the hood of a fuzzy onesie with pointed ears. From the front, she looks like a red panda – a small, racoon-like mammal from the eastern Himalayas. I tell her as much. "You know what this is?" she says. "It's rare. Extinct. This is the last one of them. A Wondabear."

The Wondabear is choppily strumming an acoustic guitar. Janelle has worked to build about an hour and a half of guitar practice into her daily routine, which goes something like this: First thing in the morning, she avoids her phone, which she keeps by her bedside, though she "would prefer to keep it in the toilet." Then, she dives into what she calls her "fertilizer hours."

"I'm working out between 9:30 a.m. and 10:30, somewhere between that, because I'm going to bed at 1:00 or 2:00 if I'm really locked in," she says. She often listens to Spotify's playlist of rap by women, Feeling Myself, while she does full-body, high-intensity interval training. Next, she practices guitar, then eats around noon, then practices piano for 45 minutes. After that, she pencils in some time to make something beautiful: "I don't care if it's me doodling. Making things brings me purpose."

Once she's fertilized, she allots three hours to conference calls and questions from her array of collaborators. She often decompresses with a show – *Severance* is a recent fave. (Janelle, a woman of exquisite taste, also loves *Bob's Burgers.*)

When I find her on an acoustic guitar, Janelle is practicing a song called "Lipstick Lover." "I like lipstick on my neck," she sings coolly on it. "Leave a sticky-icky in a place I won't forget." The song is about queer intimacy and tinged with reggae, notable since reggae and its sister genre, dancehall, have a storied history of some homophobic hits – like, murderously homophobic. Janelle wasn't considering that context when she made it, though. It didn't cross her mind. Her own memories did.

"I have a whole spreadsheet with 50 to almost 100 experiences that I had at this party," she says of her courtyard ragers. "I've been a Lipstick Lover," she tells me. "I wear red lipsticks at the parties. I've had moments where if me and a girl or an energy ..." she says, getting away from gender, "want to engage, you're going to see lipstick." Janelle would leave her mark, making it clear they had been kissing.

Sometimes it happens the other way around. "I remember how it felt when I got kissed on my neck with red lipstick. I remember how I went to bed feeling. It was a deep rouge. It wasn't matte. I remember the way the person looked. And I was like, 'That's a fucking song.' "

Janelle is notoriously mum about the specifics of her love life: "I have a policy and agreement with myself – that is a part of my life that I want to keep private. I can talk about my identity, I can talk about my sexuality. I can talk about all things Janelle Monáe without having to go into detail. You know what I mean? It's not necessary."

The Age of Pleasure is righteously sexual, sometimes coyly, sometimes sumptuously. "Only Have Eyes 42" plays like an ode to polyamory, or at least, a romantic three-way. "I'll say this," she offers when I bring it up. "My hope is that people can feel what I was experiencing versus me telling them details about it. I was just like, 'I want people to feel like they were there with me.' Whatever that feels like for them, I want them to have that moment."

A couple of years back, Nyong'o was tickled by rumors that she and Janelle were an item. "She has magnetism that they were obviously picking up on. She is that enigmatic," Nyong'o tells me. "People are curious about enigmatic people. I was not surprised. And I don't mind being associated with her in any capacity."

When Nyong'o was first ascending the heights of Hollywood after winning the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress in *12 Years a Slave,* she met Janelle at her first Met Gala. "This world is still extremely new to me and unbelievable," she remembers. "[Janelle] came up to me and just gave me the realest hug. I think we may have swayed to the music. She was just like, 'I'm so proud of you, and just thank you for being you.' "

Celebrity interactions can feel shallow and ephemeral. This one was not: "At some point, [Janelle] asked me for my phone, put her number in and said, 'Let's stay in touch.' She was like, 'I really mean it. If you need anything, I'm here for you.' " Ever since, Janelle's been someone Nyong'o can rely on, whether for advice in a moment of crisis or a party invite.

Even so, Nyong'o doesn't feel like she knows Janelle inside and out. "Just because you're a close friend of hers doesn't mean you get to know everything about her," she says. "I think that's what makes her interesting as an artist."

IN THE FIVE years since Janelle came out as pansexual, there's been a groundswell of representation of and support for LGBTQ and gender-diverse people. Bad Bunny has openly embodied sexual fluidity in his art and interviews. Beyoncé's latest album, *Renaissance,* is proudly indebted to and inclusive of queer tastemakers. Insider.com found that even the rate of confirmed LGBTQ characters in animated children's shows increased by 222 percent from 2017 to 2019.

Per Gallup, the share of American adults who identify outside of heterosexuality doubled from 3.5 percent to 7.1 percent between 2012 and 2022, with 21 percent of Gen Z adults landing on the LGBTQ spectrum. And while tallies of our trans and nonbinary populations are recent and evolving, last year, an expansive one from Pew Research Center found that 1.6 percent of U.S. adults and 5.1 percent of young adults don't ascribe to the gender assigned to them at birth. More and more people also know someone who is trans, and most Americans have at least heard a little about gender outside of the binary of woman and man.

There's also been a fierce backlash to this budding sexual revolution. From Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law to dozens of bills targeting drag shows across the country, we've seen more than 400 anti-LGBTQ bills introduced so far this year.

I ask Janelle if she's keeping up with the growing scroll of queerphobic legislation. "I am," she says. "It's infuriating, it's cruel." Last spring, Janelle released an anthology of Afrofuturist short stories in collaboration with several other authors. The book, *The Memory Librarian: And Other Stories of Dirty Computer,* would likely be banned in states like Florida for centering queer and trans characters – an example, she says, of "us not being able to talk about ourselves, as though we're not real people."

She's dedicated much of her career to championing the people this kind of bigotry affects, herself among them. But when I ask if there's a weight to that expectation, to being embraced as an emblem of queer advocacy or queerness itself, she emphasizes her freedom to be a person and not just a symbol. "You cannot project onto artists," she says to no one in particular. "You have to understand that experiences will be had and people will change and evolve and not be the person you look up to. As much as you love and care about me, I'm on my own journey that has nothing to do with music, has nothing to do with art."

There was a time, she adds, "where I felt like I should put pressure on myself to live up to expectations of what I feel like a majority of people would want me to do. But that time isn't now."

At this year's Pre-Grammy Gala, Janelle wore a black Vera Wang gown with a neckline that plunged to her waist, and a skirt with a sheer train that descended from her hips. A fan on Twitter wrote, "janelle monae finally showing off how fine she is instead of dressing like the monopoly man." This allusion to the signature black-and-white tuxedos she wore early in her career tickled her. Those suits were a kind of uniform, she says, one she wore to honor her parents: Janelle's dad was a garbageman, her mom a janitor who shuttled Janelle to theater classes, and sometimes chose to make sure she had her stage costumes instead of paying the electricity bill.

Janelle likes to think of ways of being in terms of elements. "I'm working in my soft, flowing-water energy right now," she says. Though she values how the suits of old represented an important disruption of gender and beauty standards, they did offer her a sort of protection. "I never felt like I wanted people to see me soft," she says. "Growing up in Kansas City, my mom would always be like, 'If they hit you, you hit them back.' " That rock energy, as she describes it, even seeped into what she wore. "But I think that there's so much power in water." She's sure to point out that suits themselves aren't innately antithetical to softness, so as not to alienate anyone.

I stumble through some of my questions on her gender and sexuality, because I understand how weird it can be to talk publicly about who you are and like to fuck. I have some friends with whom I'm pretty queer, and way more with whom I never acknowledge that part of me. "I'm not obligated to share my story," says Janelle. "Nobody's obligated. But I do think it's powerful for me to talk and give a name to some of these things."

As Janelle sees it, the fact that we can live a real life and tell its full story is what separates us from the artificial-intelligence engines in the headlines when we meet: "The way in which we have had sets of experiences together in real time, in person, will be the thing that makes us special."

Janelle, of course, foresaw the surge in AI. "When *Metropolis* came out, *The ArchAndroid* came out, I was saying that this is the moment where this is going to happen," she says.

As we speak, Elon Musk is fucking up verification on Twitter, and anonymous songwriters are going viral with songs by artificial Drakes and Rihannas. It's already getting harder to tell what's real.

This, she says, is akin to Ray Kurzweil's *Singularity Is Near,* a nonfiction book that influenced her androids, and popularized the idea that one day distinguishing between AI and humanity may be impossible. "So the age of pleasure that I'm in, that we are in," she says, "is the last of life before we're fully integrated." [*Cont. on 76*]

JANELLE MONÁE

[*Cont. from 75*] When Janelle and I catch up on Zoom a few weeks after Wondaland, she's just returned from a robotics conference in Santa Barbara. "I was invited," she says. "With everything happening with AI, people are wanting to know my thoughts." She says she got to see machines made by Boston Dynamics, the Hyundai-owned company that produces a viral robotic dog that has caused controversy across the country after being embraced by law enforcement. Janelle didn't speak there. "I was just listening," she says. "It's not going away, and I think that a lot of it has to do with who's programming and what are the values and the morals – what are we teaching it? It's complicated. It's nuanced."

With her prior albums, Janelle concocted dystopian futures to reflect current problems and illustrate resistance, using a rift between androids and humans to illuminate issues of bigotry. *The Age of Pleasure,* by contrast, is about relishing what's already been achieved. It's celebratory. It's dancing on ashes until they fertilize new life. It's insular, a clearer portrait of her life rather than a defense of it. "I also shouldn't have to teach anybody why it's important to protect queer Black life, trans Black life, nonbinary Black life. I shouldn't have to make an album about it," she says after I note that building empathy was a goal of hers in the *Dirty Computer* era. "I don't even think that anybody should have to tell a story of empathy for you to get that," she says now.

"This album is not about a fight," she says of *The Age of Pleasure.* "It's about living in an oasis created by us for us. Even with everything going on in the world, this is our moment to breathe together, unapologetically taking this beat to enjoy – to hurry up and live."

The freedom and compassion of the Everyday People parties at Wondaland grounded her in this. "I saw strangers smiling at each other; the women feeling comfortable enough to take off their tops and get in the pool," she says. "If somebody had drank too much and they were throwing up, you would see somebody who didn't know this person pull their hair back. Little things like that were so incredible to me. And if I was not actively saying, 'Stay present, stay present, stay present,' I would miss all those things."

A week and a half later, when I see Janelle one last time, she's in the throes of a very different kind of event – it's one of the Met Gala's most storied afterparties, atop New York's Standard hotel, and she's the host. Billie Eilish, Olivia Rodrigo, and Lil Nas X are among the slate of entertainment elite who come by.

Janelle shape-shifts from MC to performer, serenading the crowd atop the horseshoe-shaped bar – once again singing on the furniture. Earlier in the evening, she wore a Thom Browne coat inflated by a circular tent of a dress to the Gala. Now, she strips down to the sparkling black-and-white bikini she had underneath to belt "Float," a look that's a bit of her tuxedo past and a lot of her bare-body present. She enlists us all in a toast. "I've been in the age of uncertainty," she says. "But tonight, this year, we are in the age of motherfuckin' pleasure!"

Her DJ, Kwabena, plays a reggae remix of Beyoncé's "Party" before Janelle performs "Lipstick Lover" publicly for one of the first times. The two songs are a perfect match in bounce and BPM, just like they've practiced poolside at Wondaland West. The same friends from Janelle's game night sing and gyrate beside her, drawing the crowd deeper into the moment – and their new world.

UVALDE MARIACHI

[*Cont. from 67*] town have embraced the team and the good news they've brought home. Hernandez was grabbing a bite with a few friends when someone stopped him, asking, "Aren't you part of the mariachi team that won?" Members of the community went up to Fernandez while he was waiting tables at El Herradero de Jalisco, a Mexican restaurant on Main Street, and congratulated him. When the students wore their maroon mariachi T-shirts outside of school, Uvalde cheered them on. Ovalle is careful about boasting, but knows the win meant something to the community. "I don't know how to say it," she says. "We made them proud, I guess."

The seniors have begun to make plans: In the fall, Hernandez will head to Texas A&M University, Kingsville, where he wants to keep studying music and get a teaching degree. Mejia hopes to open a detailing workshop in Uvalde with his little brother, while Escobar is thinking about studying business at Southwest Texas Junior College in town. Fernandez will join her there while he wraps up his associate's degree, and then he dreams of transferring to the University of Houston to become a pediatric therapist.

All of them are trying to imagine life outside of Martinez's class. "This has been the most consistent thing I've been in," Fernandez admits. He's already started saving money to buy his own violin. Ovalle is thinking about lessons they picked up from Martinez, how he instilled a work ethic in them. "Our seniors are graduating, and they'll take that with them in the future," she says. "And me, I'm still staying here. I'll teach it to the younger kids that are coming in."

Before running off in different directions, there's one last thing they all have to do. Uvalde's school district hosts a giant concert for the community at the end of every school year, and each grade level – from middle school up – showcases its skills. In the days leading up to the big event in April, Martinez designed glossy programs with photos of the mariachi kids' journey to state. The concert title was printed on each one: Serenata a Mi Querido Uvalde. *A Serenade to My Beloved Uvalde.*

The concert takes place on a sunlit Thursday. The younger kids perform first, and even the occasional rogue violin squeak seems to charm the crowd. Their cheers become even louder once the varsity team lines up in their *trajes,* holding their instruments.

Before the varsity team's last song, an ecstatic burst of brass and energy called "El Mariachi Loco," Martinez takes the mic. "We have five graduating seniors this year," he says, then asks each to step onstage with their parents. During all the concert planning, he found time to make little mementos, framing photos of every senior in their mariachi uniforms.

"This is just a token from me and my wife," Martinez says, and suddenly, his voice catches. A few of the kids cock their heads, eyeing him a little closer because maybe they heard wrong, but no, it's true – Mr. Martinez is crying. The parents take photos and step offstage, leaving the seniors in the center with their arms around one another.

"All right," Martinez says, regaining his composure. "This is it, guys. This is their last song." A shudder seems to run through Fernandez. He exchanges a look with Escobar and Mejia, before turning their attention back to their music stands. A swell of violins and guitars kicks them off, and they play for Uvalde one last time.

DEATH AT A FRAT FIGHT NIGHT

[*Cont. from 59*] weights, jumping rope, and sparring with other members of the gym. "He was in perfect health," says Corona. "He was never winded, unless we did cardio. He was in great shape."

Valencia told friends that he was giving up drinking, vaping, and weed. Foster would later tell authorities that he complained of "severe headaches" following the practice matches, but medical experts would find no evidence of previous brain trauma.

Aleman, a finance major who DJ'd on the weekends, says that, like Valencia, he was drawn to the event by the charity aspect: "We've been doing this thing for 10 years," says Aleman, who had worked Fight Night before, but never participated. "It was the biggest philanthropy event on campus. I wanted to do it for my fraternity."

Aleman says he didn't hit any special gyms, though he took it seriously enough to stay clean the month before the event. "I was entirely sober on all substances," he says. "I wasn't training professionally, but I was running a lot."

Valencia and Aleman were both juniors, and despite being in rival fraternities, barely knew each other. They first met at a Kappa Sigma flag-football game a few days before the fight. "We introduced ourselves in public," he says. There was no "bad blood."

IN THE LEAD-UP to Fight Night, flyers are posted throughout campus, and students drop off their participation forms at the student union between classes. Student weigh-ins sometimes take place at the student union, and mock press conferences are, on occasion, hosted there, too.

Still, the university denies any involvement with the event. Any questions pertaining to Fight Night "should be directed to Kappa Sigma as it was an off-campus, non-university event," UNLV's director of campus affairs, Francis McCabe, told ROLLING STONE. "UNLV has no authority to regulate off-campus student activities."

In a statement, UNLV said that it "[extends] our deepest sympathy to the family and friends of Nathan Valencia. Nathan's passing has also greatly impacted our university, and over the past year and a half, we have transparently reviewed our practices and implemented changes that will help prevent such a tragedy from occurring again. UNLV is no longer affiliated with the Kappa Sigma fraternity organization." Additionally, UNLV said that it commissioned an independent review and implemented "nearly all of the 20 recommendations made by" the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.

Technically, Fight Night was sponsored by the University of Nevada chapter of Kappa Sigma, which was itself officially connected to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Yet Fight Night, despite being an amateur boxing match, fell in a legal gray area. Since it wasn't a public event, the Nevada Athletic Commission, which oversees all unarmed combat in the state, didn't have authority. Since it wasn't a college sport, the university didn't have to regulate it. Essentially, the fraternity was expected to oversee itself.

While three nurses were in attendance at the 2021 event, Kappa Sigma organizers did not arrange for EMTs to be present – a standard requirement for all amateur competitions in the state. And three students who participated in previous Fight Night events say that they couldn't remember the presence of medical staff at the events in which they'd participat-

ed either. Aquino, the sorority member and former Fight Night participant, says that at one Fight Night, the only medical staffer in attendance she was aware of was a 24-year-old communications major whose medical résumé consisted of a single CPR course.

In the 2021 Fight Night, the referee, Chris Eisenhauer, stepped in at the last minute to oversee the matches after Kappa Sigma was unable to obtain a trained referee, according to three students and the attorney general's report. Eisenhauer, who does not have any certified referee training, got involved with the event because he's the older brother to someone in Kappa Sigma, two students tell ROLLING STONE. (Eisenhauer, who is named in the Valencias' lawsuit, did not respond to a request for comment.)

Six students who participated in UNLV Fight Nights say referees lacked experience and would let fights run crucial seconds longer than these participants believed they should have – a dangerous infraction in a lightning-fast sport where serious injury can be meted out in one bone-crunching blow.

In a 2014 fight, Mark Anthony Posner, the then-president of Sigma Alpha Epsilon, was knocked unconscious in the ring after his opponent elbowed him in the face. Posner fell to the ground, and when he came to, blood in his eyes, his opponent was crouched on top of him, "still swinging," Posner says.

The referee called the fight, but Posner begged to continue, telling the ref, "I'm not gonna end it here," he says. At Posner's insistence, the ref let him fight additional rounds. In the end, he lost because he "couldn't see" through the blood. His fight ended with a trip to the hospital. "My entire eyelid was completely split open," he says.

In an MMA-style match during 2017's Fight Night, a referee hesitated to call the fight as Phi Delta Theta fraternity brother Josh Bigham delivered blow after blow into his opponent's skull. To Bigham, it seemed that his opponent could no longer defend himself, but he continued, thinking that "maybe the kid looked better to the ref than he did to me," he says.

Eventually, Bigham says, this referee tapped on his shoulder, signaling the end of the fight. If Bigham had already sensed the referee's inexperience, the shoulder tap was a dead giveaway: MMA referees signal the end of a fight by physical intervention, often using their body as a shield or using brute force to pry off the winning fighter. This ref was clueless; they all were. "We did not have legitimate referees. They didn't know anything about fighting," says Bigham, who participated in three Fight Nights over three years. Bigham can't remember whether or not the other fighter's nose was broken, but by the end of the fight "he was bleeding a lot out of it," he says.

If there's disorder in the ring, there's pandemonium in the crowd, adding to the anarchy of Fight Night. Alcohol is plentiful at the events, despite the fact that many of the people there are underage. Fists fly in the crowd or in the parking lot before and after the event, but none of the students I spoke to could remember any security in attendance at events. "Everyone was trashed," says Bigham. "They pregame for these events. There's always a handful of people that fight in the parking lot beforehand." At her own Fight Night, Aquino says, "people were screaming, drinks were flying, and alcohol was everywhere."

SOMETIME IN THE 10 minutes that Valencia and Aleman were in the ring, a blood vessel separated from Valencia's skull, filling his brain with blood. Later, according to one individual familiar with the autopsy, Valencia was diagnosed with a rotational injury to the head that caused a subdural hematoma. Even if he survived surgery, he would always be in a vegetative state, the surgeon told Valencia's mother at Sunrise Hospital and Medical Center the evening of the fight.

When Valencia died four days later, the coroner's report would indicate that it was a direct result of blunt-force trauma to the head. While his death was ruled a homicide, it has not been classified a crime.

Valencia's parents, Cynthia and John, have found no easy place to rest the blame for Nathan's death. They have since filed a lawsuit against UNLV, Kappa Sigma National, the Sahara Events Center, where Fight Night was held, and the referee overseeing the match in hopes that both universities and fraternities will regulate similar events with increased scrutiny in the future. They accuse both UNLV and Kappa Sigma of having prior knowledge of injuries related to past events, and allege that Kappa Sigma neglected to ensure students' safety, inspect gear, and hire qualified professionals to oversee the match. The suit alleges that the defendants are "in some manner negligently, vicariously, and/or statutorily responsible" for Valencia's death. "It's our hope that we can shed light on this tragic event with a sincere desire to create awareness to prevent this from ever happening to another family," says the family's attorney, Benjamin Cloward. (In legal filings in response to the suit, all of the defendants have denied the allegations.)

Besides Kappa Sigma's UNLV suspension, in December 2021, the Nevada Athletic Commission passed "Nathan's Law," an emergency regulation requiring its oversight on any unarmed combat hosted by university-affiliated groups in the state.

Though Fight Night has been permanently banned from UNLV, charity boxing events are still held annually at universities throughout the country. In February 2022, a fraternity-sponsored event called "Boxing Weekend" was held again at the University of Tennessee after a four-year suspension. The 2018 event had been interrupted by the death of a student who collapsed in the ring from cardiac arrest after taking Adderall and caffeine before the fight.

IN THE WAKE of Valencia's death, rumors about Aleman spread throughout campus. The attorney general's report raised questions about his gloves, which went unexamined by both police officers and the attorney general's office after the event. Several people close to Valencia told me they thought Aleman may have put a weighted object in his gloves in order to injure Valencia, a rumor lacking evidence. Others also whispered that he was intoxicated.

Both Aleman and Aleman's family attorney, Sean Claggett, adamantly deny these allegations. They say Aleman was sober, and note that neither police nor the attorney general asked to examine his gloves. "There was nothing in the gloves," Claggett says. "They were big, soft gloves, because no one was trying to hurt anyone. There is no question in my mind as to why Emmanual is not listed as a defendant in the lawsuit: It's because he didn't do anything wrong."

Yet Lyn Julian, Aleman's stepfather, understands why Valencia's grieving loved ones suggested this: "If Emmanuel died, we would maybe be thinking the same thing."

After Valencia was taken to the hospital, Aleman sent him a text: "Hey man hope you're doing ok good fight brother! All love." He went to visit Valencia the next day, but was asked to leave by Valencia's friends. He didn't attend the funeral. "I thought it would make it more about me than Nathan if I showed up," he says.

In the months following Valencia's death, Aleman fell into a depression. Several people close to Valencia reached out to Aleman on social media, telling him that Valencia's death was his fault. Fellow students sent death threats along with screenshots of his family home. "Guess who knows where your mommy and daddy lives," one student wrote. People have reached out to both his current employer and venues where he DJs, attempting to get him fired and saying he shouldn't be hired after what happened.

As rumors swirled at UNLV's campus, Aleman's mental health deteriorated. He has suffered anxiety going out in public. "I don't know what people's opinions are when they see me," he says.

The Alemans have not reached out to the Valencias because they were afraid their overtures would be unwanted. "We offer our condolences and would love to talk to the family," Julian says. "We understand, because it could have happened to us."

Months later, the Valencias are still reeling from the death of their son. On Mother's Day 2022, Cynthia Valencia was in the bathroom getting ready when someone knocked on the door. Immediately, she thought it must be Nathan. But then, as she reached to open it, she stopped short, realizing suddenly that whoever was knocking was not Nathan, and would never be Nathan again.

For Cynthia, the world has been transformed into a minefield of grief. So many seemingly innocent things – words, names, places – can now deliver sudden emotional wounds. She cannot bear to hear the words "graduation" or "UNLV." She will likely never return to the beaches of Southern California or Lake Tahoe, favorite family vacation spots.

"He was my world, you know?" she says.

"We are a broken family," says Nathan's father, John. In the months following his son's death, John, a devout Catholic, has found himself doubting his faith in God. Now, he looks for signs of his son in everyday life. At one point during our conversation, he takes out his phone to show me a photo of a tapestry hanging in the living room: In the crushed folds of the fabric, he can see a face resembling Nathan's. It is a small comfort to John, who sees it as confirmation of his son's closeness.

John feels a pang of envy every time he sees a family of four. He dreads the spring, when Nathan's scores of friends – those kids who were always huddled upstairs in Nathan's bedroom playing video games or hanging out on the back patio – will graduate college.

John had thought that the passing of time might ease the unbearable weight of his grief, if only a little, but he perpetually finds himself pulled back to the bottomless well. Some days the pain is so acute, it is like losing Nathan all over again. As the one-year anniversary of Nathan's death approached, the Valencias prepared a celebration of life at a nearby park, honoring Nathan's memory. They have found it impossible to move forward because of the lawsuit, which requires that they regularly revisit the circumstances of his death. (The trial is set for May 2024.)

The Valencias have yet to touch anything in Nathan's room or sell his car, which sits idle in the driveway. Foster still occasionally stops by the Valencia home. Sometimes she sits quietly in Nathan's room, alone.

"The dirty clothes in Nathan's room are still there. We've kept everything the exact same," says John. "In our minds, he'll come back."

Bowen Yang

The 'SNL' star on conversion therapy, dating while famous, and more

The comedian is on NBC's 'Saturday Night Live' every weekend.

What does Pride Month mean to you in 2023?
Pride is that step beyond acceptance where there's some power in understanding who you are and why, and being in opposition to certain things. Culture and society afford you this clarity and this strength, and this year, especially, I feel it's very important.

What inspired you to be a comedian?
I think it came out of necessity from moving around a lot growing up. The thing I leaned on was to ingratiate myself in finding the quickest way to a laugh. With that instinct baked in, it led to me watching comedies, watching *SNL* every week. And after a certain amount of time, you convince yourself there's no other option for you.

You grew up in a strict Asian household. How did that affect your experience of being gay?
It felt very isolating. I thought, "Am I the only person feeling this way?" There wasn't a vocabulary around conversations that I think a lot of adolescents are having right now. You just had to rely on your own instincts. In my teens, it was about laying low while still finding a way to express yourself, trying to avoid the embarrassment that seems fatal to you at that age. A lot of that gets tied to queerness in a way that back then felt dangerous, felt undesirable, and truly felt like a life-or-death thing. I would hear stories about how gay kids would get kicked out of the house, and I thought, "That would happen to me if I were to come out, so let's not do that." Now, there seems to be less of a narrative that you'll be completely out on your own.

I read that you were made to attend conversion therapy. What did you take away from that?
I think ultimately that made me value and, in a literal sense, appreciate what I'm able to withstand and survive. I know that sounds kind of dramatic, but I think nowadays that's pretty important. If I can be like, "Well, I went through this thing, so I'm sure I can get through a hard day on set" – not that those two things are comparable at all – it puts a frame around why you do what you do. For that to be so closely tied to how I'm publicly, openly queer now, is meaningful. Hopefully, it's an example of how it doesn't have to end the way you think it ends when you're desperate.

What was that first year writing on *SNL* like?
It's a weekly challenge for everybody to make it to Saturday and not get anybody killed. My first season there was a pretty big crucible where it doesn't matter how seasoned you are going in, you have to negotiate how much of your own voice you mold into the show to serve the show, and how much you service your own comedy.

***SNL* has spawned all these high-profile relationships — Pete Davidson and Kim Kardashian, Colin Jost and Scarlett Johansson. How about for you?**
Yeah. I don't know if it's because of the queerness that I feel like it doesn't apply to me almost – I'm not working with the same pool. I'm like, "Good for them! I'm sure it's lovely." Look, who wouldn't want to not be on the apps and meet people? I'm having a hard time with it on my own. Outside of work I'm like, "Oh, God ... I've gotta open up this thing to meet these people?"

Are you on Raya?
Am I "on it"? It's on my phone, and I am engaging with it minimally. I have not wrung too much out of it.

You're in the upcoming *Wicked* movie musical as Elphaba and Glinda's Munchkin friend Pfannee. What can you tell us about that?
I'm in awe of the scale of it and the intimacy of it. It's really about the relationship with these two characters, with Elphaba and Glinda – and Cynthia [Erivo] and Ariana [Grande]. I'm excited to pull back and work on my own thing. I have had a really good time supporting other work that is not necessarily my own, that I can put my own imprimatur on, and that's the exciting next adventure for me. MARLOW STERN

This interview was conducted before the May 2 Hollywood writers strike.

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**

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Pieces of **Me**

SAMIRA WILEY'S RADIANT LEGO® SELF-PORTRAIT

"Her smile is as electric as her personality, seamlessly switching between warm sincerity to playful joviality."

A surge of excitement rushes as I sit down to interview actor and queer icon, Samira Wiley, about a collaboration made in my own personal gay heaven: a 5-foot tall portrait of Wiley, created entirely from LEGO bricks. The portrait was created to kickstart a campaign encouraging the use of play and creative expression, to explore who we are and celebrate our identity.

"There's some fun visuals in there." Wiley grins. "Things you wouldn't know unless you were in the room with us." Her smile is as electric as her personality, seamlessly switching between warm sincerity to playful joviality. As we're troubleshooting audio for our video call—a remote conversational ritual in 2023—she oozes a zen-like charisma.

"One second," Wiley holds up a finger before disappearing from the screen. Moments later, I hear her interacting with her daughter, George. Gleeful tones of toddler whimsy emanate from off-camera. Even in her search for a device with cooperating sound, Wiley holds time for her kid.

Just as quickly, Wiley is back on camera. Her video's landscape orientation has been replaced by portrait framing, and the name "Lauren" displayed below suggests she's swapped the unobliging desktop for her wife's mobile.

"Okay, I can hear you." She beams again.

Interview by Leah Judge | Photographs by Erik Carter

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ERIK CARTER**/PRODUCED BY **RHIANNA RULE**/HAIR BY **RICHARD GRANT** AT **EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS**/MAKEUP BY **MALAINE REINER**/NAILS BY **SARAH CHUE** AT **EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS**/STYLING BY **SAM SABOURA**

JUDGE: Samira, this project beautifully examines the concepts and components of personal identity. For you, when looking back, what early identity influences stand out?

WILEY: I didn't see a lot of characters that looked like me and loved like me. If I did, they weren't fully realized, three-dimensional people or played by people who identified the same way the characters did. That was a big moment for me to realize –wow, these things which didn't exist when I was younger–not only do they exist now, but I'm a part of them.

JUDGE: You've greatly contributed to representation but all that attention can be tough.

WILEY: Before my second TV role, I had conversations with my confidant, my wife, about not wanting to be pigeonholed, not wanting to be cast as the gay girl every time.

JUDGE: I get that fear. This idea that "gay" is a genre rather than a facet of a whole person.

WILEY: [Laughs.] Exactly. But I was participating in this stereotype that a Black, gay woman is one thing and one thing only. This warped thinking like, because someone wants me to play another character who happens to be Black, queer, and a woman it's the same thing. Left up to my own devices, I might have sabotaged myself.

JUDGE: Thankfully, for all of us, you didn't.

WILEY: My wife, Lauren, helped me realize what a privilege it was to be a Black, gay woman and bring life to a Black, gay woman on TV. To have someone know this is not just a fictional character. This person exists. That was a real epiphany for me.

JUDGE: As an actor, you're repeatedly taking on different identities. How do you infuse yourself into your work?

WILEY: For a long time, the way I thought about acting is, you go up and you have to forget every single thing you are and all your history and completely become another person. One of my acting teachers said, "Samira, there's nobody up there but you. Every character you bring to life can only be influenced by your life experiences and the way you walk through the world." I've found the answer to so many things by saying yes to that idea.

JUDGE: And you started acting on stage when you were pretty young.

WILEY: I was 9 or 10. I remember telling my parents, "There's this theater camp. I gotta go." I ended up being a part of this program connected with Howard University all the way through high school. It gave me so much confidence and introduced me to a part of myself that has become much of who I am and what I do.

JUDGE: What was it about theater?

WILEY: In elementary school, kids would recite poems on stage. One year, watching this girl recite; it felt like acting to me. She had this power. All the sudden this entire auditorium full of little kids is sitting up in their seats. They're paying attention because of the strength and power you have with your words and body on stage. I was like, I want to do that.

JUDGE: I know that feeling - nothing is going to stop you from doing that thing. Any other empowering childhood influences?

WILEY: I immediately go to my mother. And sister. Two of the strongest women I know. My sister's the mother of five kids and owns her own business. My mother has two doctorate degrees. So, I'm just trying to catch up. I remember my mother's stories growing up: adversity but also joy, triumph, and so many things which go along with triumph to be an important, successful Black woman in this world.

JUDGE: Now you're a mother yourself. To a toddler, no less

WILEY: Marriage is the hardest thing I've ever done. [Laughs.] It's saying yes to the same person every single day. It's a beautiful thing. And then you put a baby in the middle of it. I don't know why people do this. It's crazy hard. Parenting has expanded who I understand myself to be as a whole human. It's taught me my capacity for love and patience is greater than I thought. It's also dropped me to my knees at points.

"I didn't see a lot of characters that looked like me and loved like me."

LEFT: TOP BY **OFF-WHITE**/JEANS BY **MOUSSY**/
SANDALS BY **CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN**/EARRINGS BY **CANDY ICE**

"I feel I've found a real sweet spot of just complete play."

JUDGE: Parents are heroes. I watched my two-year-old niece for two weeks. I was exhausted.

WILEY: Two weeks! That's a long time

JUDGE: I was like, Mother's Day really--

WILEY: --should be every day. I know. And then you think about single mothers, my God. But, yeah, the family we've created is one of the reasons I know why I'm here. It's the big journey in my life: figuring out how to be a mom and wife.

JUDGE: How do you seek to inspire your daughter, and even other people you meet, to embrace who they are?

WILEY: Making a conscious choice – my wife and I – to be visible in this conversation. We're two women who've been married for six years. We have a stable, loving family. We can walk down the street and hold each other's hand. We take our daughter to school together. Things many people could not dream of. So I'm proud of the family I've created. There's so much pride there. Genuine pride.

JUDGE: You exude such authentic, individual expression–even in your style.

WILEY: My parents were pastors. I was in the church every day. I wore church dresses. Then there was a time in high school where I didn't know what was going on. As I look back, it was the beginning of exploration about queer identity. I remember feeling my brother's backwards hats and jerseys, stuffing them in my backpack so my family wouldn't see me wearing these things at school. Then you realize, it's somewhere between the backwards hats and the church dresses. That's where I found myself.

JUDGE: When we're conditioned to dress a stereotypically gendered way, it can be such a challenge to find that place.

WILEY: People spend years trying to figure out, what am I going to be? What am I going to represent? Andy Warhol said, "Art is anything you can get away with." That's what I'm asking when I'm putting an outfit together. "What can Samira pull off that no oneelse can?" I feel I've found a real sweet spot of just complete play.

JUDGE: Let's talk about this stunning portrait you've created with the LEGO team.

WILEY: I realized quickly what amazing passionate, caring, thoughtful people I was working with. It was quite striking. They were able to help me appreciate me and my story. It was incredible to walk into a room and have people really walking the talk.

JUDGE: This project seems like it would spark a lot of creativity and introspection.

WILEY: This whole thing has been a very uplifting, rewarding process for me. Being able to investigate and think critically about different parts of my life, I was very encouraged by the team. I would leave these meetings sometimes in tears, and so inspired. I'm always inspired by someone else's creative process and the way they think about the world and art.

JUDGE: What are some standout visuals in the portrait?

WILEY: A couple of my tattoos. There's one called Nsoromma which is a West African Adinkra symbol. It's the first tattoo I ever got. It means "child of the heavens." For me it symbolizes that my presence here on Earth is not a mistake. It's divine.

JUDGE: This Pieces of Me project is about celebrating the unique pieces of our identities. Based on your own experience, what advice would you give LGBTQIA+ folks as they learn to embrace themselves?

WILEY: Advice is hard because our journeys are so individual. But the thing that's helped me through life is knowing: if no one else has got me, I've got to have me. I've got to have self-love. I've got to understand my self-worth. If you grow up in a place where you're never shown you matter, it's not the easiest thing to just say one day you're going to believe that. But I do know, any person, wherever they are in their journey, if and when they can find that, something might turn around. My journey to self-acceptance has changed me, saved me and allowed me to thrive.

"My journey to self-acceptance has changed me, saved me and allowed me to thrive."

As we conclude, and Samira returns to her delighted two-year-old, I consider the kaleidoscope of portraits that would emerge if everyone were to ponder the same question: "If you were to build a LEGO portrait that celebrates YOU, how would you create yourself in brick form–and what pieces of your identity would you be most proud to share?" Undoubtedly, there would be recurring motifs echoing our shared human experiences–love, acceptance, community, artistic expression, and play. Yet, just as captivating would be the dazzling array of specificities and quirks that render us so fantastically, singularly ourselves. ■

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FROM TOP: JUMPSUIT BY **ET OCHS**/SHOES BY **ALEXANDRE BIRMAN**/JEWELRY BY **PARKER THATCH**; SUIT BY **PARABAL GURUNG**/SHOES BY **CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN**/JEWELRY BY **VRAI**

Rolling Stone

Tina Turner

1939 - 2023

The transcendent star left us just as this issue was going to press. We'll celebrate her life, her legacy, and her unparalleled musical accomplishments in the days ahead. But for now, we'll leave you with this iconic image of the Queen of Rock & Roll.

JACK ROBINSON/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES